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CHOSER BROTHER

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CHOSEN BROTHER

by

Gloria Fry

A ScoTpress publication

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GARY!...

Jim Kirk tossed and turned as the recurring nightmare held him in its pitiless grasp.

GARY!...

Silver eyes flashing with raw, vicious, merciless, absolute power.

GARY!...

Hate staring at him out of the changed eyes of his oldest friend. The power to dominate given full rein, forcing him to his knees.

GARY!...

Thinking himself a god. Pitiless in his might. Demanding submission. His deepest desires now uppermost in his mind as he ordered, 'Pray to me, James.'

GARY!...

Weakened temporarily by Elizabeth Dehner. Elizabeth - also changed - had retained her Human compassion and respect for life. She had not been corrupted by the immense powers at her disposal.

Kirk sat bolt upright on his bed. Sweat poured from him. It ran down his face, streamed down his chest and back. He shivered violently and bent his face down to rest against his knees, clasping his arms around his legs in a bid to stop his trembling.

It had been almost a week since the events on Delta Vega; since he had buried Gary alive. Every night since, he had suffered the same nightmare, the events playing themselves over and over in his mind. He had lost three people on that planet. The happy-go-lucky Lee Kelso - a friend of his for years. Elizabeth Dehner, the ship's new psychiatrist - he had hardly known her, but she had saved his life, fatally injuring herself in the process. Gary Mitchell, who had turned on him, venting all the years of hidden bitterness and frustration on the friend he had once loved.

Shakily, Kirk headed for his bathroom. He immersed himself in the comfort of the sonic shower, trying to forget his pain; but it re-surfaced only moments after each time he thought it banished. It was too fresh - too recent - too intense.

He returned to his bedroom and lay down. There were several hours before he had to face the day but, although exhausted, he dared not sleep again. He tried to relax as Spock had taught him,

but the peace of meditation eluded him, and he considered asking Spock's help once more. He decided against it - he must learn to help himself.

He wished there was something he could do to ease the tight, bitter knot of grief within him; if only he could find release in tears the pressure upon him would lighten, but he had not cried since he was a sixteen year old boy. He suppressed that memory - he could not think of Gary right now. If he thought of Gary, he would crack. He had a ship to run. Instead, he thought of McCoy. They would soon reach the Aldebaran colony where Bones had stayed behind to work on an important new vaccine while the Enterprise headed for her mission at the Galactic Barrier. Maybe he would be able to talk to McCoy; perhaps his friend, with his deep understanding of Human nature, would be able to help him.

In an attempt to spare Spock any more distress he had been careful to keep his feelings to himself. He knew that such extreme emotion affected those Vulcan telepathic senses. He had seen it only too graphically, when in an unguarded moment - in a spasm of grief - he had reached out to grasp the Vulcan's arm. The glimpse of horror and pain in Spock's dark eyes had been terrifying, while the recoil of his body had been immediate and definite. Startled by Spock's reaction Kirk had drawn back, bringing his agony under control with intense determination. If he had not yet been aware of the effects of his emotion on Spock, he was now. There and then he resolved not to allow *his* pain to intrude on the Vulcan. He could not inflict that kind of torture on Spock - a being with powerful and empathic links to him. He would work through this on his own.

Kirk closed his eyes and drifted into sleep again.

GARY!...

Silver eyes returning to normal brown. 'JIM!' the well-known voice said in a tone of complete confusion; in a plea for help.

GARY!...

Hurling a boulder at him as if it weighed nothing. Crazed with a power Kirk was unable to match, determined to make him suffer, determined to humiliate him.

GARY!...

Once as close to him as a brother.

GARY!...

Who had ended up hating him with violent fury.

GARY!...

The soft whistle of the intercom woke him out of the nightmare. He let out a soft moan of relief as he took a few moments to find his voice.

"Kirk here."

"Transporter room, sir," Kyle's voice said. "You asked to be informed of Dr. McCoy's arrival."

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Kyle. Ask him to report to me once he is

settled." He sat back, took a deep breath and called the bridge. Spock's calm countenance appeared on the screen. "Mr. Spock, take us out of orbit and continue on our planned course."

Spock hesitated. "Captain, are you all right?"

"Fine, Mr. Spock. I am just a little groggy - just woke up. Follow your orders."

"Affirmative," the First Officer said.

Kirk shook his head. He could not fool his friend, but since that moment when he had given Spock all of his pain, the Vulcan had maintained a discreet distance from him. Maybe it was best for both of them; they had become too close these past few months - far too close. Spock had been exposed to all his feelings during the times he had healed him, and on the occasions when they had spoken mind to mind. Also, Kirk wondered what damage Spock had taken from the overpowering mind-meld and death of the planet-being of Athos only weeks ago. It had almost killed the Vulcan. Only Kirk's own empathy with Spock, his persistence and desperation, had drawn him back. Spock had told him that even a Vulcan healer could not have done it. Only the link with Jim - his chosen brother - had been strong enough to recall Spock from the depths of his mind where he had withdrawn, shocked and injured.

Kirk smiled a little. He liked that term 'chosen brother'. How true it was. The feelings he had for Spock were very like the ones he had for Sam. Because of that he must protect Spock from any more of that deep, painful grief over Gary. He sighed at the thought of his older brother Sam, now light years away on Deneva with his wife and son. Sam would have smiled at him with love and deep sympathy, and would have held him tightly in his arms until his little brother's grief had been spent in tears. Then he would have talked to him, easing his worries and fears. Sam was a brother to be treasured; six years older than Kirk, he had at times been like a father to him.

Yet he wondered if even Sam would be able to help him over the depth of his grief and guilt over what Gary had become; over the pain of his death. He groaned in agony as the memory of Gary's rapid decline into corruption forced itself on him. If only he could lean on that reassuring Vulcan strength. With a sigh, he recalled Spock's restful, comforting healing power. Quickly, before the temptation to ask Spock's help became unendurable, he dismissed the thought. Put his friend through such an ordeal? Never!

McCoy came to Kirk's quarters immediately after arriving on the Enterprise. The news of Gary's death had shocked him deeply. He knew that Jim would take it hard, but he was unprepared for the stiff, tense, tight-lipped Captain who greeted him with a silent look.

"Jim," he said, reaching out to touch his shoulder, feeling the tension in the hard muscles. "Jim, if only I had been here."

"It would have made no difference," Kirk said, indicating a seat.

McCoy sat down opposite him. "What happened, Jim?" he asked gently. "What happened to Gary?"

"You must have read my report," Kirk said sharply.

"Yes, but it only gives the bare facts," McCoy persisted. "I know how Lee died, but what caused Dr. Dehner's death and Gary's?"

Kirk's throat constricted as he felt the nausea rise within him. "Doctor, I have work to attend to. We will talk later."

McCoy watched him closely. It was worse than he had feared. Jim was denying his grief, attempting to keep it under control. As a Doctor of many years' standing, McCoy knew only too well the effects of denial of major trauma; in the Captain of a Starship it could easily lead to disaster. He noted the strained look, the paleness of Kirk's usually glowing complexion, the dark smudges under his eyes.

"You've not been sleeping properly, Jim," he stated.

"I'm fine, Doctor. Please excuse me."

"Jim!" McCoy protested. "You must talk to me."

"Later!" Jim suddenly flared at him, his eyes flashing in anger.

Seeing the deep pain in him, McCoy forced himself not to retaliate. "All right, Jim," he said finally. The last thing he wanted to do was to pressurise him more. "I'll be in sickbay. Come and see me when you have some time."

Kirk nodded fractionally, and with a sympathetic smile, McCoy reached out to clasp his hand. For a split second, he thought Jim was going to draw away from him. Jim Kirk, withdraw from a friendly touch! It was more serious than he had thought. He breathed a sigh of relief as Kirk returned the grip for a moment. "Thank you, Bones."

When Kirk did not appear, McCoy's worry increased. He tried to corner him at various times over the next few days, but the Captain said very little to him, and once had stormed out of the room in fury when questioned about Gary. McCoy began to be very worried about his friend, and deciding - for the moment - not to force him to have a complete medical, which would cause more stress in the process - something he was loath to do - he sat in sickbay and considered his options.

There was no option left but one. No matter how often he went around with the problem, he always returned to the one person he knew, deep in his heart, could help. He could not escape the inevitability of that choice. He had nothing in common with the First Officer; they had never spoken on anything like friendly terms - they had always rubbed one another the wrong way. Mr. Spock scared him; he faced that honestly. The cold Vulcan disdain gave him the shudders. Yet Jim basked in the Vulcan's presence, happier than he had ever been since McCoy had known him; at ease, confident within himself and within his command. McCoy had seen how Kirk had recalled the Vulcan from a coma-like condition when all normal medical knowledge had been useless. He had seen the mind-link between the two. He had observed the very real chemistry between them - the silent uncanny communication. He had heard Kirk call the Vulcan 'brother' - and the First Officer had responded. There was a very unusual and powerful friendship there. Surely, Mr. Spock would know what to do?

He had never been to the First Officer's quarters before. On

entering he felt an irrational touch of fear on seeing the strange alien artifacts against the vivid red drapes upon the wall. He pulled himself under control as Spock rose to greet him.

"Dr. McCoy," Spock said politely, "how may I assist you?"

McCoy forced himself to come closer. "I wish to talk to you about the Captain's health."

"Indeed," the Vulcan replied tonelessly. "Please be seated."

Nervously, McCoy sat down. He chewed at his lip wondering how to begin. Would this ice-cold alien understand? Could he even *begin* to understand the problem?

"I'm worried about Jim," he said finally, forcing himself to look at the expressionless face, shuddering at the cold stare he received. "He is holding in deep-seated grief over Gary's death, and he won't talk to me - keeps avoiding me. He needs to talk to someone, to let out that grief. He needs relief. Has he spoken to you about it?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "He has not discussed it with me in any detail. He is restraining his emotions admirably."

"Dammit," McCoy spluttered. "It isn't healthy for Humans to bottle up such emotions. He'll make himself ill. He can't control that kind of grief. It will twist and turn inside of him - poisoning him - until he releases it. He blames himself for the deaths on Delta Vega. What I don't understand is why? He is burning up with some kind of guilt over Gary's death, and I don't understand that either. A Commander can't allow himself to feel that way over the death of any of his crew. He must mourn them, yes. If he did not - he would not be Human."

Spock sighed deeply as the Doctor's piercing blue eyes stabbed at him with anger. He tightened his shields. McCoy could not penetrate the strength of his mental barriers as Jim could so easily do, but the force of his emotions was highly uncomfortable. "Doctor," he said coldly, "if Captain Kirk wishes you to know his feelings, he will inform you."

"That isn't good enough, Mr. Spock," McCoy replied angrily. "The Captain's mental and physical health is my responsibility. I must know what is troubling him. The safety of this ship and crew is in question. If he will not tell me, then he must confide in you, his First Officer. He's close to you in some way - I've seen it. He recalled you from a condition I could not begin to treat. I know you have powerful telepathy - you must... You *must* be aware of his pain. Are you so damn unfeeling?" He stopped on seeing the total lack of expression on the Vulcan features. He had no idea of how to reach him. "Mr. Spock," he continued more gently, trying reason instead of blind anger. The Vulcan was highly intelligent, extremely civilised; Jim respected and admired him, had sought his friendship in a way McCoy had never seen him do before - as if he could not survive without him. "Jim has been my friend for many years. I have the greatest respect for him and the warmest of feelings, but he won't let me near him. I'm his Doctor - I must help him - but I can't do so if you will not assist me. Don't you care about him at all? Don't you care what is happening to him?"

Spock looked down, unsure of what to do. He could not discuss matters about which Jim had confided in him, but was he at liberty

to discuss with McCoy the incidents at the barrier and at Delta Vega? Those were incidents which Jim was trying to forget.

He remembered the day after Mitchell's death. He had been in Kirk's cabin going over the duty roster with him to find adequate replacements for Helm and Navigation, when Kirk had suddenly paled and had started to shake. Thinking he was ill, Spock had gripped him around the shoulders to support him; Kirk had turned to him, clasping at him in desperation, his mind and body crying out in need for some kind of comfort. The depths of his torment and grief hit Spock like a raging torrent, entering him with devastating force. Every time Spock recalled the intensity of that pent-up nightmarish pain, he shuddered. It had sliced through his damaged telepathic shields, reaching the sensitive receptors beneath; caught off-guard, he had recoiled from Jim as if struck by a powerful blow. He had doubled up for a moment until his control had returned, then had straightened to see Jim's intense stare upon him. For a long, excruciatingly intimate moment, Jim had looked deeply into his eyes, then had drawn back and had apologised.

Spock knew he should have pursued the matter then, but he was still trembling inside from the pain, and too afraid to expose himself any more to the Human's emotions; he had allowed Jim to walk away.

He had noted how Jim had kept a tight rein on himself since, but he was aware of the continuous pain, even though Jim had tried to hide it from him. He had hoped that his friend would be able to deal with his grief as a Vulcan would - by controlling and erasing it. But he was beginning to realise that there was more than ordinary grief here - something more, perhaps due to the events on Delta Vega, of which he, Spock, was unaware.

Jim had not told him the details, and Spock tried to overcome his own guilt. He had been too much of a coward to take Jim into a meld to learn what was troubling him - to ease his suffering. What kind of friend was he? How could he withhold comfort from one who was his brother? *Coward*, he berated himself silently. *You are unworthy of such a friendship.*

"Spock," McCoy's voice interrupted. "He called you his friend - his brother. His affection for you has grown so deep. Does that mean nothing to you?"

Spock stood. "Do not question me, Dr. McCoy. I know my responsibilities to my Captain." He stepped forward. "It is not your concern."

Angered by the aloof attitude of the Vulcan, McCoy's eyes blazed. "I thought I might find that the Vulcan Jim has befriended might return a little feeling towards him, but I see I was wrong. A walking computer has nothing but circuits and memory banks. It has no heart, no soul." He rose to his feet. "What kind of person are you, Mr. Spock? Jim has lost more of his crew, one of them his best friend, and all you can say is 'he is controlling his emotions admirably'!" His tone was scathing, and in his outrage he did not notice that he had moved to stand close to the First Officer. He glared up into unfathomable alien eyes. "He needs a friend - someone he can talk to. He needs a shoulder to cry on."

The Vulcan raised his eyebrows in alarm. How could he expose himself to Jim's terrible guilt and grief and allow the intimacy of physical and mental contact? His shields, shaken by the recent

months of his friendship with Jim - almost totally destroyed by the encounter with the omnipotent planet-being of Athos - had taken many hours of discipline to repair. The force at the Galactic Barrier had also weakened them, but he had managed to keep that from Jim; he had spared his friend, knowing his difficulties. Dealing with Gary Mitchell had been enough; if Jim had even guessed that Spock had been affected - what would that have done to his confidence? *Too much has happened*, Spock argued with himself silently. He could not leave himself open, vulnerable - not even for Jim. Could he?

"Doctor, you are a Human, and his friend," he said. "You must do what has to be done."

"He will not allow it," McCoy said wearily. "I have tried. He won't talk to me." The expression on the Doctor's face softened. "Mr. Spock, Jim relies on you. He is so relaxed around you. Please try to help him. He needs you."

Suddenly Spock saw him in a different light. Gone was the crusty, abrasive Human - in his place was a compassionate and caring being deeply concerned about the welfare of his friend. He came to a decision - the only one possible. "Very well, Doctor. I will try, but I cannot guarantee success. I am a Vulcan. Feelings are alien to me. There is much I do not understand about Jim, even though he is my friend."

McCoy stared at him, wondering about him. He had noticed how different the Vulcan was around his Captain. He never seemed quite as cold. Sometimes he even seemed to stand by Jim in a protective manner! He shook himself. Why was he projecting his own Human interpretation upon the Vulcan's behaviour? He could be completely and utterly wrong! Yet he remembered the look on Spock's face when, against all the odds, Jim had roused him from the coma after the mind-link with the planet-being. The Vulcan had seemed so awed, so open as he had stared up at Kirk.

His thoughts were interrupted by Uhura's voice urgently calling Spock to the bridge. He quickly followed the First Officer, almost running to keep up with the long stride. There was silence between them as they stood in the turbolift, and he wondered if his talk had done any good at all.

Spock stepped out onto the bridge. Kirk swivelled around to him. "Ship approaching, Mr. Spock. Take your station."

Spock complied, relieving the officer there. Within a few seconds, his interpretation of the sensor readings were ready. "It is a Class Two Spican Cruiser, Registration number: DF1970. Owner: Lady Sara-Marisson Ianddi. Reported missing ten solar years ago - presumed lost during the Klingon attack on Spica Five. One life-form. Body readings extremely low. The ship is drifting, sir. Engines are cold; no signs of activity except the readings, which I believe are emanating from the cryogenic chamber."

"She must have gone into cryogenic suspension - the only way for her to survive."

"Affirmative, sir," Spock said.

Kirk turned to McCoy. "Prepare to beam over, Bones."

"Captain," Spock said, "I would recommend the landing party wear environmental suits. The temperature is too low for Humans to

exist in any comfort, and it is possible there are contaminant substances in the atmosphere."

Kirk suddenly smiled at him, the first time in fifteen point three five days Spock had seen a smile from his usually friendly Captain. He realised how much he had missed that.

"A worthwhile precaution, Spock. You have the con. McCoy and I will beam over.

Spock watched him leave the bridge, seeing the slight spring in his step. Perhaps the rescue mission would be the best thing for his Captain. Perhaps the distraction of saving the life of Lady Sara-Marisse Ianddi would take his thoughts away from his grief.

The most beautiful woman Kirk had ever seen lay peacefully asleep in suspended animation within the small ship's cryogenic chamber. The shallow breathing of her slim but perfectly shaped body barely stirred the long black hair which streamed down her body reaching to her tiny waist. The paleness of her skin accentuated the darkness of her hair. Her face was exquisite, like some elfin being out of legend. Kirk wondered what colour her eyes were.

McCoy studied his mediscanner. "She's perfectly healthy as far as I can tell, Jim, but I'll need the Enterprise medical equipment to confirm it."

Kirk nodded. "Beam over directly to the isolation chamber with her. We don't want any risks to the crew."

"Right, Jim. Did you find out anything here?"

"Not a thing. The drive is completely dead. The computer is burned out. Only this life support unit functioned. I'd say she was very lucky to survive, Bones."

"Drifting here in space for ten years. It's like the old legend of Sleeping Beauty, waiting here for her prince."

Kirk stared at her intently. "She is very beautiful."

McCoy glanced at him for a moment and smiled. If Jim was finding an interest in a member of the fair sex then that was a good sign, and a welcome one. "I'm sorry you can't waken her with a kiss," he said with a glint in his eye.

Jim laughed, embarrassed. "I'm no prince," he said.

"Some might disagree with you," McCoy replied.

He grinned with satisfaction as he saw Jim flush with pleasure at his remark.

Once it was confirmed that the woman they had taken aboard was Lady Sara and McCoy had determined that she was completely fit, Kirk decided that he would be present when she was revived. He told himself it was his duty as Captain to find out about the details of the wrecking of the Spican ship, but something else prompted him also, he knew. There was a compelling aura about the woman; she lay

there like a fairy princess just waiting to be wakened, and he watched as the revival procedure was initiated, finding that he was holding his breath in anticipation. He wondered again what colour her eyes were.

Slowly the woman's breathing deepened as she began a steady climb to normal sleep levels. A lock of her thick hair slid to hang over the side of the bed. Kirk clasped his hands tightly behind him to stop himself touching the shiny softness. Gradually a flush came to the pale alabaster of the woman's skin, her long curling dark lashes flickered, and after several interminable seconds her eyes opened.

Christine Chapel leaned over her. "You are safe, Sara," she said reassuringly. "You are aboard the USS Enterprise. I am your nurse, Christine. This is Dr. McCoy and Captain Kirk."

A slight smile crossed the beautiful features of the woman. She turned her head, looked at McCoy, then at Kirk. Her smile widened, lighting up her whole face. Kirk returned the smile. Blue - her eyes were a vivid, piercing blue.

He clasped his hands tighter. "Welcome aboard the Enterprise, Lady Sara. Rest, we will talk once you are sufficiently recovered."

Her eyes flickered in acknowledgement of his words, and for a moment he thought he saw a glimmer of interest in her expression. He smiled at her warmly with all the force of his unique charm, and saw her lips curve into an alluring response. This time he was sure. Once she was better, he would invite her to a formal dinner with his officers. He did not permit himself to think of what might occur later.

After their daily exercise training in the gymnasium, Spock decided to broach the subject of Gary Mitchell, but he was unsure of how to begin; Jim was decidedly touchy on the matter, and Spock had never attempted to deal with a Human's grief before.

The changing rooms were deserted, so before he lost his courage, he stood before the Captain and began. "Captain, it has been fifteen solar days since the events at Delta Vega. Mr. Mitchell's death is - "

Kirk tensed. "I don't want to discuss it, Mr. Spock."

"Sir," Spock persisted, trying to ignore Kirk's hard stare, "perhaps I could help. I wish to help - "

To his startlement, Kirk flared up. "I will not discuss it. Did I not make myself clear? Leave me alone, I'm perfectly all right. I do not need your help."

The anger and rejection coming from Kirk was strong. It caused a strange churning feeling, which was most uncomfortable, in the pit of Spock's stomach. He reached out to touch his friend's arm, but Kirk stepped back, avoiding the contact.

"Jim, you are in pain," Spock said, his concern plain.

"Of course I'm in pain," Kirk hissed. "I'll get over it. Mind your own business, Mr. Spock."

"Jim!" Spock said, unable to control the sudden hurt he was feeling. "You must talk to someone - it is illogical... "

The sound of laughter reached them as two crewmen entered the room.

"Excuse me," Kirk said, seizing his chance to escape. He quickly left the room, leaving Spock staring after him in confusion.

Resolutely, Spock took control of himself. He could not understand his Human friend; he had tried to talk to him, but Jim had refused his help. He could not force him, he could only be there if he was needed. He had once told him that he would be there. Jim would remember that.

He walked to his quarters. McCoy must have been wrong. Jim did not require his help at this time. He sat down at his desk and steepled his fingertips together, recalling Jim's words, his expression, his tone of voice, and he grew even more uncertain. Something was definitely wrong with his Captain, but the stubborn Human was refusing to acknowledge that he needed help. He was not giving in to his grief as a Human should. The show of temper had sprung from that.

What was Spock to do? He knew he could ease Jim's suffering with Vulcan mind techniques. He had never tried those particular ones before, but he knew they would require a lowering of his still shaky barriers; it would mean exposure to the deep inner feelings of a highly emotional Human. The type of mind-touch he would have to employ would normally only be used by Healers who specialised in such problems, or perhaps a family member whose bond with the person ran deep. He shivered as he realised he had trapped himself. Jim had become his brother in the ancient way; it was a bond more powerful than one of blood. It was his duty to help; if it meant pain to himself then he must accept it and overcome it. If it meant that his shields be further damaged, then so be it. Jim's peace of mind was more important than anything.

Spock decided that he would take Jim into the deep healing meld. He could do it. Jim was receptive to him; he had triggered the power of Spock's untapped healing ability spontaneously when seriously injured on Athene 2. What more could be achieved if Spock applied the Healing? He would accept such an intimacy for Jim's sake. He must not fear what was clearly his duty to give. He had taken on the responsibility of Vulcan friendship, which meant true rapport with one's friend. Even Humans felt responsible for their friends and tried to ease their pain. He - a Vulcan - could do so much more.

But Jim would have to permit it.

Spock tasted bitter regret over the moment he had recoiled from Jim. If only he had been able to find the courage to accept that plea for help then! If only... *Coward*, he berated himself again. *Unworthy coward*.

His intercom sounded. "Spock," Kirk's voice said.

Spock felt a jolt deep within him at that voice. Eagerly he switched to visual and scanned the troubled features of his Captain, seeing the lines of strain on his face, the nervous chewing of his lip. He had another chance.

"Yes, sir," he said formally, his voice annoyingly clipped when he wished it to be reassuring. He resolved to try harder; he must try to show Jim how much he was worried about him.

Kirk stared at him for a moment, then in a voice tinged with genuine apology, said, "I'm sorry. I should not have lost my temper with you."

"Your apology is unnecessary, Jim," Spock said.

Kirk's face cleared a little. "No, it is necessary. I can't treat you like that. I know you only wish to help me, but I assure you, I will be all right. I promise you." He looked down, and Spock could see the utter weariness in him.

"Jim, where are you?" Spock asked, his worry showing in his tone.

Kirk looked up at him, then smiled slightly. "Will you join me for a meal?"

"On my way," Spock replied immediately.

"Thank you, Spock," Jim replied gratefully.

As they ate, Jim began to speak of their current mission to contact the star-travelling civilisation of Avilia in an attempt to persuade them to join the Federation. Ambassador Dovo-Ran had joined his ship at Aldebaran and now prepared for his arduous task by keeping to his quarters most of the time studying the known facts about the peoples of Avilia. Kirk was glad of that. He did not care for bureaucrats who tried to interfere in the running of his ship, especially now with his difficulty in overcoming the nightmare of these past weeks. He did not need anyone poking about.

Spock listened to him intently, making no comment, but his calm and reassuring presence filtered through to Kirk's jangled nerves and gradually the Human found he was beginning to relax. He took a deep breath as he realised how much better he was feeling; he smiled at his friend, about to tell him how he felt when, unbidden, the phantom of Gary sitting beside them at this very table only weeks ago intruded on his thoughts. Kirk felt the calmness drain away, leaving him tense and choked. Sweat broke out on his forehead. He had to get away from this place. He could not bear to be here.

He stood abruptly. "Excuse me," he said, and turning away, he left the rec room in uncharacteristic haste.

Spock stared after him in astonishment. Why had Jim left? Half of his meal was untouched! Why had he suddenly stopped in the middle of his conversation? What had caused him to turn so pale? Worry threatened to overcome the Vulcan, but aware that all eyes in the room now looked at him he forced himself to show outward calm, and returned to his own food. After one bite of his salad he pushed the plate away, unable to eat.

Lt. Uhura came over to the table. On seeing her, Spock stood. "Yes, Lt. Uhura?" he said.

"Is the Captain all right?" she asked, her lovely face full of concern.

Spock stared at her. "I do not know," he answered tonelessly.

She looked up at the tall Vulcan. He made her feel so tiny and fragile as he stood there towering above her, but she did not fear him. No woman was ever afraid of Mr. Spock; his gentleness and courtesy were always apparent. They were a natural part of his being.

"Sir, he seemed upset."

"Indeed," Spock agreed. "However, I do not know why. I regret that I do not understand Human behaviour."

"Mr. Spock, do you think I should postpone the concert? Captain Kirk is still grieving over the deaths of his friends."

She had been worrying for days, but had been undecided whether to ask the First Officer's opinion. Aware of his strict privacy, she had been unsure if he could or would assist her.

He blinked, slightly startled by her question. He knew about the concert; in fact Jim, after hearing him play the lyre one evening, had wanted him to share his musical talent and play for the crew in the very concert Uhura now was considering cancelling. He had told Jim that he would think about it, but had since decided that he would be unable to play for an audience of so many people. Playing for Jim was one thing - but for the entire crew?

He remembered the contentment which had oozed from Jim that evening as he listened to the sounds of the lyre. Spock had felt it radiating from him. He wondered if he should reconsider his decision, imagining Jim's delight if he appeared in the concert.

"Please be seated, Lieutenant," he said indicating the vacant chair opposite him.

With a touch of surprise showing on her features, Uhura did so. She waited silently as he re-seated himself.

"Lt. Uhura, I believe you should go ahead with your plans for the concert. Captain Kirk was looking forward to it. Perhaps it will help him to take his attention away from his troubles." He paused. "Is your programme complete?"

"Well, sir, I'm still juggling with it, but I am looking for more performers. At the moment, there is only enough material for about an hour's entertainment."

Spock's attention on her was total. She had never been under such close scrutiny before and she shifted uncomfortably under that Vulcan gaze. How did the Captain take that penetrating look on him? How could he bear it? Spock's next words caught her totally by surprise.

"I wish to audition."

She gulped. "You, sir?"

She could not believe it. A Vulcan perform at her concert! Spock, performing at her concert! She openly stared at the austere, expressionless face. Such a being... The First Officer... A Vulcan... In her concert!

"Yes, Lieutenant," Spock replied. "May I?"

"W-Why of course, sir," she said. "But..." She took a deep breath. "What is your... I mean..." She trailed off uncertainly.

"I play a musical instrument - not unlike the Terran lyre."

"I - ummm, see. I would be pleased to listen to you, Mr. Spock." Who was she kidding? She would give anything to hear him play. She tried to control her excitement. "When would it suit you, sir?"

Spock considered for a moment. Should he audition now, in his off-duty time, or should he go to Jim? Try once again to help him, find out why he had left in such a hurry.

"Tomorrow, after the first shift."

"Very well, sir. In the theatre room then."

Spock bowed his head slightly. "Thank you, Lt. Uhura. Now if you will excuse me...?"

She stood up when he did. "Mr. Spock," she said curiously, "I did not know you played a musical instrument?"

He avoided her eyes. "I do not normally play for others."

Uhura's curiosity was intense now; she had to know. "Then why do you wish to now?"

He hesitated for a moment, then met her lovely, interested gaze. "It is the Captain's wish I audition for you," he said quietly.

She smiled widely. "Then you have played for him?" she said, suddenly realising his motive. It was his way of pleasing Kirk, his way of trying to help the man who was his only friend. She knew that he would play well, but to overcome Vulcan reserve and privacy as he was doing showed her a measure of his regard for Kirk. She was deeply touched. "I will look forward to hearing you, sir."

He bowed again. "Thank you, Lt. Uhura."

Uhura watched him leave; a tall, thin, lonely figure. Somehow he seemed lost, forlorn without Jim Kirk beside him. This was the time they always spent together, dining after the training session in the gymnasium, talking in a relaxed amiable fashion - the very personification of Federation belief in the equality and friendship of all species.

She had worked with Spock for a time when Pike had been Captain of the Enterprise. The Vulcan had been highly respected for his many abilities, but he had been a recluse, always alone, seemingly by choice. She had seen the change in him Kirk had caused, and in some ways she was not surprised. Kirk had a powerful, dynamic personality; everyone felt the charge of his charisma. She herself was much attracted to him, but she knew that he regarded her as vital operating personnel, as he did all his crew. A ship's Captain could not afford to regard his female crew as anything else. In any other way lay danger to his command, his authority, the respect of his crew.

That the cold, unemotional Vulcan responded to Kirk's personal charisma, she had no doubt. He had changed in the light of Kirk's friendship. She had noticed at times the lessening of his tight control in the way he reacted to Kirk's jests and teasing with a bemused and startled air, the way he stood tall when praised by Kirk, the manner in which he stood by his Captain's shoulder, ready to support him at all times.

It was far from one-sided though. She had also noted the difference in Kirk - from the unsure, tension-filled, lonely young Captain to the relaxed, confident and assured commander; that is, until recently. Gary Mitchell, in death, unsettled Kirk even more than he had done in life. She sighed deeply, hoping that the Vulcan could ease his Captain's grief as he obviously wished to do.

She sat down again and wished for tomorrow to come quickly. Mr. Spock auditioning for her! Playing the mysterious Vulcan lyre for her! Unbelievable!

Spock tried the Captain's cabin, but found it empty. He wondered what to do. Should he call him over the intercom, or should he leave him to find solitude somewhere within the vast ship which was their home?

He walked to his own quarters and entered. Picking up his lyre, he absently began to tune it. What complex, illogical beings these Humans were, unpredictable in their emotions. How was he to deal with his Captain?

He sat in his chair and stared at the far wall. Jim Kirk had changed his life, causing deeply hidden emotions to emerge, piercing his normally inviolate shields with ease. He had no defence against the pain of a chosen brother - his duty was to support him, assist him, heal him if possible; but he could not do anything if Jim would not allow it.

For a moment he longed for the days when Captain Pike commanded the Enterprise - no demands except those required by his scientific duties, no need to be involved in another's life, no companionship, no friend. Nothing. Pointless existence. Loneliness. He closed his eyes and mentally chastised himself. *Coward, afraid of commitment, afraid of living, afraid of your half-Human heritage.*

He began to play his lyre, losing himself in the beauty of the music, trying to find an answer to his problems in the soothing melody.

McCoy was a little surprised when Kirk entered sickbay during the time he usually spent with Spock, but he made no comment.

"How is your patient?" the Captain asked.

"She's very well, Jim. A little malnourished, but that is to be expected after ten years on concentrates. Do you want to talk to her? She is delightful."

Kirk nodded. "I'd like that, Bones."

A little later he was ushered into the presence of the

beautiful Sara-Merisse Ianndi, and he was struck once again by her exquisite, elfin loveliness. She held out her hand and he took it between both of his. Her tiny hand lay trustingly in his, dwarfed by his - by comparison - large ones. She smiled up at him, her face open and innocent as she gazed into his eyes.

"Captain," she said, in a husky voice which trembled with emotion, "I am deeply grateful to you for rescuing me. I can never repay you."

Impulsively, he bent and kissed her hand. Her skin felt soft like velvet, the scent of her body was intoxicating, and it was with difficulty that he drew his lips away.

"It was my duty to rescue you, Lady Sara," he said as he straightened. He smiled at her and she responded with a breathtaking smile of her own.

"Please, call me Sara."

"My name is Jim."

"Jim," she said, her voice sounding it out like a caress.

He shivered slightly but quickly brought it under control. There were many beautiful women on his ship; he did not allow himself to become attracted to any one of them, although he knew that under different circumstances, he could easily do so. This woman was not crew and his normal restraint deserted him. He dismissed his guilt over feeling this way. He was a young, healthy Human male - sexual urges were normal. Sara was attracted to him - he knew it - he always knew when a woman wanted him. He would woo her if he had to, but she would be his.

"Dr. McCoy says I may be discharged soon," she said. "May I ask what my future will be?"

He smiled reassuringly at her. "Once we have finished our mission to Avilia, we will drop you at the nearest Starbase or Federation world where the authorities will assist you in your return to civilisation. I'm afraid I cannot tell you how long it will be before we can do this, but there is much of interest aboard the Enterprise, and I am sure you will want to catch up on events. You are ten years out of date; much has happened in that time."

"I do wish to learn all that has occurred during my long sleep, Jim," she said, "and I hope - " she added with a slow smile of promise - "we can become good friends."

"I am sure we will," he replied, assuring her.

At the Captain's request, the ship's senior officers attended a formal dinner to honour their aristocratic passenger. When Kirk arrived at Sara's quarters to escort her to the officers' lounge he was startled when he saw her tininess. She stood barely up to his shoulder. Somehow it made her more feminine, more vulnerable as she gazed up at him with her wide blue eyes. She wore a shimmering blue gown which matched her eyes perfectly; it was cut low over her breasts, and as it moved with her breathing, he could not help but stare.

"Shall we go?" he said finally.

She took his arm, and as they walked to the turbolift he was aware of the admiring stares of the male crew upon her. Well - what if being Captain gave him certain perks?

The dinner went well; Sara was a delightful guest, telling many tales of her life on Spica before the Klingon attack. All were amused and interested by her except Spock, who watched her with clinical detachment, and Janice Rand who stared at her with barely concealed hostility.

Janice noticed how the Captain - her Captain - treated the woman as if she was some fragile toy to be cherished and stroked. She saw his hand rest on Sara's for a time, and her lips curled in jealousy. He had never treated *her* like that! She watched as they stood talking intimately in the corner, and did not hear Uhura come up behind her.

"Janice, don't be so obvious."

The yeoman gave a startled cry and turned to face the Communications Officer. "What?" she gasped.

"If Captain Kirk wants to be gallant with a passenger, then it is his business," Uhura said bluntly.

Janice flushed and looked down. Uhura, feeling sorry for her, drew her away to the other side of the room.

"Janice, I've been meaning to talk to you about this anyway."

They sat down, neither knowing that Spock was well within Vulcan hearing range.

"You must learn, Janice, that the one man not accessible on any Starship is the Captain. He cannot possibly look to his crew, you must understand that. He has a wife and a lover - her name is Enterprise."

Janice sniffed and looked down. "I know," she said, embarrassed, "but he is so gorgeous... so attractive. When he looks at me, I go hot all over. I want him to touch me."

Uhura smiled. "I know," she said sympathetically. "You're not the only one who feels that way, but he is the Captain and that makes him out of bounds." She squeezed the younger woman's hand. "There are many men aboard this ship."

"Yes, but only one Captain Kirk."

Uhura laughed a little. "It's ironic that the two most desirable men aboard are both totally inaccessible to us poor females. You will just have to accept that."

Janice joined in with her laughter. All the women were attracted to Mr. Spock and she was no exception. When women crewmembers got together Spock was often the main topic of conversation. They would laugh as they fantasised what it would be like in his bed.

Uhura looked up and glanced at the solitary Vulcan, remembering his audition for her. She had known he would play well, but had

been unprepared for just how well. The stiff tension of his body had eased as he played his lyre; his face had relaxed as the music had taken him. She had gladly accepted him for her show and was trying to persuade him to accompany her singing. He had told her he would consider it but had not yet told her his decision.

She then looked at Sara and wondered anew about her. When introduced to Spock, the Spican woman had suddenly become still, and her face had grown cold. No woman reacted that way to Spock - he was too exotically handsome, powerfully masculine in his own gentle and courteous way. She wondered if anyone else had noticed Sara's odd response to the First Officer.

The evening at an end, Kirk escorted Sara back to her cabin. She invited him in and he accepted willingly.

"Thank you for a lovely evening," she said, looking up at him with shining eyes.

"I am glad you enjoyed it - " he began.

She gazed at him, her eyes openly inviting now. She studied his face, glanced at his mouth, blushed delicately at his open hunger.

"Sara... " he murmured, bending down to meet her lips.

She slid her arms around his neck and held on to him tightly as he pressed demanding kisses on her. She met them with a passion which matched - even surpassed his own, and he moaned with relief as bitter pain, guilt and frustrations were swept aside by the intensity of his desire.

He lay in dreamless sleep on Sara's bed. She watched the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed in contented repose and she smiled, delighted at her conquest. Her hand slid down his body, feeling the hard muscle under the smooth skin. He would be easy to control; Humans were so gullible. She would give him all the physical gratification he desired until he depended on her totally, a willing slave. Then she would make him take her 'home'. She would free her people from bondage. After that, she would discard this Human and his crew and joyfully be reunited with her own ones.

Yet she was afraid. It would not be as easy as she had anticipated. There was one aboard who might suspect her. She had noted the mental start from the one introduced as Spock. He had been aware that there was something different about her, but she was unsure if he would be able to tell that she was not the person she appeared to be. She had never encountered such a being before, but had sensed his telepathic abilities. From Kirk's mind she had gained some knowledge of the Vulcan, and she smiled, knowing that Kirk, caught up at the peak of the sexual act, had been unaware that his thoughts had been read. Gradually she would assimilate his personality, his feelings, his character, and then she would plan her campaign to infiltrate his life.

Kirk awoke and stretched out lazily on the bed. He felt a soft touch upon his chest and he opened his eyes to gaze on the beauty of his new lover. Her alluring smile took his breath away, her urgent

touch brought fresh desire. He pulled her down on top of him.

"Bridge to Captain." The sound of a male voice intruded.
"Please acknowledge."

"Damn," Kirk muttered. "Damn." He sat up, holding Sara to him and pressed audio response. "Kirk here."

"Message from Starfleet, sir," the voice of Lt. Simons said.
"Urgent, sir."

Already, Kirk was pulling on his clothes. "On my way." He turned to Sara. "I'm sorry, duty calls. I'll be back if I can."

"I will be waiting for you," she replied.

Spock was on the bridge. He vacated the command seat as Kirk entered, staring at him as the Captain seated himself and ordered the message transmitted. Spock had noticed the contentment from him, the lessening of tension, immediately. He raised an eyebrow in wonder at the strange barbaric customs of Human sexuality. There was no doubt that Kirk was less stressed than he had been, but underneath he sensed...

The message turned his thoughts away from such speculation.

The calm features of Admiral Komack appeared on the screen.
"Kirk, we have received a distress call from the USS Scotia. I will relay it to you now."

The Scotia, Spock recalled, was one of the latest design espionage ships, used in monitoring Klingon moves and warning the Federation of any hostility. For such a vessel to be in distress did not bode well. Espionage ships were deliberately deceptive; the Scotia appeared to be a harmless cargo vessel, but underneath its exterior lay state of the art sensors and recorders. Its crew were the most highly trained operatives in Starfleet.

The figure which appeared on the screen now was bloodied and torn, his face was bruised and one eye was swollen shut. "Mayday, mayday. We are under attack. All ships in range, please respond. Alien ship approached us offering friendship. We took all precautions, but their weapons... far superior... We had no chance... sitting ducks... Life support functions are failing... all our sensors destroyed..."

The image was replaced by Komack's. "That is all there is. It is vitally important that ship does not fall into enemy hands. You must make sure it does not, if its Captain has not already done so. Find out what attacked them. Do what is necessary, Kirk."

"Sir, our mission to Avilia? And we have a passenger rescued from a disabled ship."

"They will have to wait, Kirk. Follow your orders. Komack out."

Kirk sighed deeply, then glanced at Spock. "Well, Mr. Spock, that's it."

"Aye, sir," Spock said.

Kirk noted the touch of concern in his eyes and smiled. "I'm all right, Spock... and I'm sorry I walked out on you the other day. I just had to be alone."

The Vulcan bowed slightly. "I am not Human, sir. I do not take offence."

"I was ill-mannered, Spock."

"Indeed, sir."

Kirk chuckled. His Vulcan friend was certainly blunt. "Yes, very ill-mannered. I apologise, Spock."

"Apology accepted, Captain."

Kirk nodded his thanks then turned to order the course change. Spock returned to his console and busied himself with his calculations. He had the answer by the time Kirk sat back and asked, "Spock, how long will it take us to reach the Scotia co-ordinates?"

"At warp six, estimated arrival time is three point six solar days."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock. Take over for the next shift." The Captain came to stand by his First Officer. "I need to get some sleep." He rubbed his eyes.

"Very well, sir," Spock said, looking up at him. He wondered if he should speak about the weariness he saw in Kirk's eyes. It was a strange, drained look. "Perhaps you should make certain you do sleep, sir. You appear tired."

Kirk appraised him silently. Just what was his First Officer implying? "I am perfectly able to make my own decisions, Mr. Spock."

Spock raised his eyebrows. "Sir, I only wish to advise you on what I perceive to be best for you."

"I noticed that Sara did not take to you. Did that upset you?"

"Lady Sara's opinion of me is not important, sir. Your health and welfare are."

The touch of anger he had felt at Spock dissolved at those words. He had misjudged the Vulcan by applying Human emotions to him where none had been involved.

Spock stood. "Jim, forgive my bluntness, but my responsibility to you means that I must tell you the truth. Take great care. There is something about her which troubles me. I do not know what it is."

His anger returning, Kirk snapped at him. "Do you disapprove of my being in the company of a woman?"

"No, sir. I only wish to advise you to be careful. You have recently been through great trauma. You have not dealt with that, do not - "

"That is enough!" Kirk hissed through clenched teeth. He was

unwilling to hear any more; he did not want to be reminded of Gary when Sara had so successfully blotted out his pain and guilt. He could not take Spock's honest and realistic words. Turning away, he quickly left the bridge.

Spock stared after him for a second, then walked to the command seat. He had only been doing his duty, but once again Kirk had walked away from him, angered and in pain. Why was he unable to help his Captain? Why could he not get through to him? He desperately wanted Kirk to be happy. For an instant time flipped and he recalled the day he had vowed loyalty to Jim; the delighted smile on the Human's face, the happiness emanating from him had stirred a deep, joyful response in Spock, something he had never experienced before. He wished that Kirk's anger at him did not cause him so much pain. This was an experience he did not appreciate, but he could not protect himself against such a response; he only hoped that he would learn to - eventually.

Sara welcomed Kirk back with open arms. He pulled her against him, aware only of his need for her. Afterwards, satisfied beyond his wildest dreams, he fell into a deep sleep free from the disturbing nightmares.

When he awoke, she brought him coffee. He sat up and sipped at the hot drink while she sat beside him, watching his every move with her large innocent blue eyes.

"Jim," she said softly, taking his hand and stroking it. "Why have you changed course?"

"Rescue mission," he replied. "Once we've determined what has happened, I'll get you to the nearest Federation outpost."

She shook her head, leaned forward and put her arms around him, pressing her soft cheek against his chest. He stroked her long silken hair, entwining the strands around his fingers.

"I want to go home," she said.

"You will easily find transport to Spica," he said reassuringly.

He caught his breath as her kisses sent shivers through him. He held her tightly, unable to resist her.

"Not Spica, my love," she murmured. "Farther than that. To the system known as Zmarra."

She looked at him pleadingly and he sighed with unhappiness at having to disappoint her.

"No, I'm sorry. Zmarra is unexplored. It is too many light years away. It would take too long." He stopped, frowned as realisation hit him. "Why would you want to go there?"

Her expression was full of entreaty, but seeing his determination, she smiled bewitchingly, then returned her attention to his body.

"Sara," he tried as he caught a glimpse of the chronometer. He had work to do - a ship to run - he was due on the bridge shortly.

But her kisses excited him as no other woman's had ever done before; she seemed to know exactly what aroused him, anticipating his deepest desires. Almost helplessly, he succumbed to her.

Kirk returned to his quarters. To his annoyance, he found McCoy awaiting him there.

"Well, Captain," McCoy said. "How are you feeling?"

There was a knowing look in the Doctor's eyes which made Kirk flush slightly in response. "I feel fine, Bones," he said.

McCoy studied him, seeing the slight shakiness as he sat, noting how the smudges under his eyes had darkened, how drawn his face was.

"Are you still sleeping badly?"

Kirk shook his head. "Like a baby. No nightmares anymore."

McCoy pounced on that. At least Jim was admitting to something. "What nightmares, Jim? Tell me about them."

"No. They're gone. Sara lifted them from me. What a woman she is!"

His eyes were sunken, and that made McCoy worry more. Jim had obviously slept with their passenger. McCoy saw nothing wrong with that. His friend was a man with a great love of life, and he certainly loved women. Kirk had not had the opportunity for a relationship with a woman since he had split up with Carol Marcus. The Enterprise was now the only female in his life - she was all-demanding - but to a man like Kirk, Sara was an ideal temporary interlude. McCoy knew that it should be a welcome relief for the Captain, but could not understand why Kirk should be so drained.

"I think you should come down to sickbay with me. You look tired."

Kirk's eye flashed in anger. "You sound just like my First Officer. I am not tired. Please leave, I have work to do."

McCoy frowned in surprise at the sudden anger, but it was the mention of the cold, disinterested Vulcan noticing his Captain's tiredness which surprised him the most. He sighed, seeing that Kirk would not listen any more, and biting back his own angry response he left. He would follow this up later.

Kirk's door slid open. He looked up to see Sara walking in, her tiny graceful form encased in a clinging silky white gown.

He swallowed. "Sara, please... I'm busy."

She smiled, sat down on his knee and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. "I missed you," she murmured into his ear.

The door opened again, and Kirk stared up with a guilty start on seeing Spock there. He reminded himself to activate the locking mechanism on his door when he wished privacy. Flushing deeply as

the cold, analytical stare penetrated to him, the urge Sara had kindled within him rapidly disappeared. It was not difficult to lift the woman from him.

She stared at him angrily for a moment, then she suddenly smiled. "Of course, Captain."

She walked past the Vulcan, totally ignoring him, but Spock tensed as she brushed by him, catching a touch of something insensitive, selfish, malevolent.

Kirk pressed the locking control, looked over at the First Officer and indicated a seat. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, only too aware of his high colour, as Spock silently sat down.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?" he finally said, deciding that he had better get down to business. Spock's look was still cold, and Kirk realised he had not seen that particular Vulcan stare for quite some time. He knew it meant disapproval.

"We arrive at the co-ordinates of the Scotia in two point one five solar days, sir. All sensors are scanning ahead at maximum range, but so far no Klingon activity has been noted. My calculations show the - "

"Spock," Kirk interrupted, the censure in Spock's voice painfully obvious to him. "I don't know what you must think of me."

"Think of you, Captain?"

Kirk clasped his hands tightly together on the desk and stared down at them. What was wrong with him? He had been short-tempered with his First Officer too often lately. Spock was not to blame. He had also treated Bones in the same manner. Shame - an emotion he was unused to - brought extreme discomfort with it, but he forced himself to look up at the piercing gaze upon him. He tried not to flinch.

"I can only apologise again, Spock. It has been difficult for me lately, but I will - I am getting over my problems. Sara is... She..." He trailed off, embarrassed in front of Spock in a way he would not have been with anyone else. Somehow the Vulcan seemed untouched by the basic, physical needs of Humans. Kirk felt like a primitive beside this most civilised of beings. Being caught by Spock with Sara on his knee made him feel as if he had done something shameful and demeaning. Well, perhaps he had; he was Captain of this ship - he could not afford to indulge in such physical urges whilst on duty. He would not keep the respect of his crew, his First Officer, by such behaviour. He resolved to control his passion for Sara. He was not some immature adolescent. He was a Starship Captain - a responsible adult.

"The Human sexual act is totally incomprehensible to me," Spock said bluntly. "But I have read that it is meant to be of benefit to the participants involved in the activity."

Kirk flushed more. "It is... "

"If that is so, Captain, please explain why she is vibrant and you are enervated?"

"I am not enervated," Kirk protested. He wiped the sweat from his face.

"Captain," Spock persisted, "your behaviour has been abnormal for some time. The events on Delta Vega have disturbed you, but you will not admit it, nor will you allow yourself to be helped. Your involvement with this woman only - "

"Spock!" Kirk yelled, unwilling to accept the truth of the Vulcan's words. "You will not pry into my personal life." His face reddened with rage as Spock stood up and stared at him with complete and open honesty.

"You have allowed me into the privacy of your mind," Spock replied.

Kirk's fury threatened to spill over into physical violence. "Then you will not do so again," he snapped.

Spock stepped back, his face taking on a pallor that Kirk had only seen once before. The telepathic senses had felt the violent urge. "I would do nothing against your will, sir," the Vulcan said. "You are my Captain, my commanding officer." He hesitated for a few moments, then added in a quiet, questioning tone, "My friend."

Weakness hit Kirk as that tone killed his anger. A lump formed in his throat as his responsibility to Spock clarified in his mind. He could hurt a Vulcan; he was able to penetrate Spock's mental, protective barriers and reach the sensitive and vulnerable being within. He did not know if it was because they had taken the oath of brotherhood in the Vulcan way, or because of Spock's weakened condition after all that had befallen them; or perhaps it was the price Spock had to pay for allowing a Human to be his friend. Maybe it was a combination of all three! Wearily he admitted to himself that he was totally unsure of the reason.

"My friend," he said reassuringly. "Please sit down." He swallowed, shaken by the force of the anger he had almost allowed to overcome him. "We have a ship to run."

He watched as Spock wrestled with the unaccustomed emotions, controlling and suppressing the kind of hurt he was feeling. "Please, Spock... Sit down. I'm sorry." He indicated the seat. "Please."

He sighed with relief as Spock resumed his seat such a short distance across the desk. Kirk wanted to reach out, touch his friend, give and receive reassurance; but, afraid he would inflict more upon him, he restrained himself. Increasing his grip upon his clasped hands, he tried not to weaken as he remembered Spock's soothing healing power which could assuage his pain like nothing else could do.

With much uncertainty and apprehension, Spock watched his Captain, his thoughts in a turmoil. Hopelessly confused by Kirk's behaviour and upset by it, he withdrew into himself, trying to find peace and tranquillity by disassociating himself from Kirk as his friend and brother. After only a few moments he knew it was useless. They were bound too closely. He would have to find another way to protect himself from Kirk's powerful emotions.

"Spock," Kirk tried again. "Please accept my apology."

"Certainly, Captain," Spock replied with a calm he did not feel.

Kirk nodded, respecting the privacy that Spock's demeanour now proclaimed. He tried to reach for some calm of his own. He did not succeed.

McCoy was surprised to see the Vulcan enter his office.

"What brings you here, Mr. Spock?" he asked. "Don't tell me you have an ache or a pain for me to treat!"

Spock raised an eyebrow at the sarcastic tone. "Doctor, I am in excellent health. I wish to speak to you about the Captain."

McCoy sighed. "I'm glad that you came. I was thinking about speaking to you again."

Spock stood stiffly, his hands clasped behind him. "Doctor, please inform me. I have only an academic knowledge of Human sexuality. What draws the Captain to Lady Sara? He is not the kind of man to succumb easily to such preoccupation concerning a basic and normal function. He spends all his off-duty time with her. He missed our daily training in the gymnasium today, which is highly unusual. It is something he always attends."

"Perhaps he prefers another type of physical exercise, Mr. Spock," McCoy commented wryly.

"I do not understand," Spock said.

The Doctor rubbed at his chin, then waved Spock to a seat and waited, trying to gather his thoughts until the Vulcan sat down. "I'll grant you it is unlike Jim to be so besotted."

"He has a will, Doctor. Is physical gratification so important to Humans that they forget all their responsibilities? Surely the Captain's command - his ship - is his life?"

"Mr. Spock," McCoy began, but finding himself increasingly embarrassed about explaining the simple facts of life to a Vulcan, he took refuge in using his most off-hand tone. "Jim is a young man. Young virile Human males need sexual release, Mr. Spock."

"Ordinary young men perhaps," Spock replied. "Starship Captains are not in such a category. A Captain's energy - *all* his energy - goes into the running of his ship, the well-being of his crew. This liaison with Lady Sara is not just sexual release. It is abnormal, sinister. She drains him - I see the decline in his strength - she does not help him. He is still in shock over the death of Mr. Mitchell; he has not begun to deal with that yet."

As he listened, McCoy had a sudden insight into the person behind the cold, aloof mask. "You are worried about Jim, aren't you?"

Spock was silent for a moment, and McCoy caught a fleeting glimpse of something crossing his features.

"His command is in jeopardy," the First Officer replied, his voice less inflectionless than usual. "He is weakening both physically and mentally. He is my friend, and that makes him my responsibility. To a Vulcan, friendship is a sacred trust; but he will not allow me to help him. He draws away from me; he becomes

angered with me." McCoy shuddered as the piercing alien stare impaled him. "You are also his friend. I ask for your help."

Taking refuge in sarcasm, McCoy exclaimed, "Well, I'll be... A Vulcan asking for help from little ol' me!"

Spock blinked. "Doctor, if you do not wish to assist me, I will leave."

Seeing he meant it, McCoy regretted his stupidity in resorting to sarcasm, something a Vulcan would not understand. He grabbed at Spock's arm to stop him leaving. Spock, recoiled and pulled away at the unexpected touch. McCoy, startled by the Vulcan's reaction, felt the heat of anger sweep him. He did not like being treated like a pariah!

"Vulcans avoid touch, Doctor," Spock said, sensing his emotions. "I am a telepath."

He clasped his hands tightly behind his back. His shields were too shaky - the slightest touch from any Human brought him the unrestrained flood of their emotions. He knew he must withdraw and strengthen the shields, for he needed protection against this ship filled with Humans. He had successfully maintained those shields for years; events had fragmented them - Kirk had found his way through, but Spock knew that he would never be able to keep Kirk totally out.

Suddenly realising that the Vulcan could have read his thoughts during that contact, McCoy hastily stepped back, all his fear of the First Officer returning. He swallowed, trying to control it. "That damn pride of his," he muttered. "I can relieve him of command if his behaviour is putting the ship at risk. You'll have to back me on it, though."

"He has not yet reached that stage," Spock said.

"The moment you suspect he has, you must contact me. We must work together on this."

The Vulcan oath of loyalty Spock had given to Kirk was a powerful one. A Vulcan could not easily dislodge a commanding officer he had sworn allegiance to. Illogical as it seemed, Spock feared that his Captain's very life was threatened by this woman, but he could prove nothing and did not know how to fulfil his responsibilities. These went beyond loyalty to a commander and into the realms of personal friendship. Kirk was his chosen brother. It was sometimes a bond closer than family; Spock suspected that in their case it was. He had tried to hide from it from the very beginning, denying his feelings of warmth towards Kirk, denying his ability to ease - even heal - Kirk's injuries and soothe his pain, both physical and emotional. He had also tried to deny Jim's ability to help him. Now he accepted it; he had been forced to - it would have been illogical not to - but he was still afraid of such deep commitment to another, still unable to deal with his Captain's open Human feelings and his own response to them.

Noticing the Doctor's curious stare, he realised that his expression must have betrayed him. He tightened his control. He had sworn to protect and defend Jim with his life. He would do so.

"Doctor," he said, "I will do what is necessary."

Encouraged by the change he had seen in the Vulcan face, McCoy said, "You must have some feelings after all, Mr. Spock. You would not have sought me out - "

"Vulcans have no feelings. Only my duty to my Captain impels me to seek your advice. Now I will leave."

McCoy shrugged, but he spoke gently. "Whatever brought you here, I'm glad you came. Jim is a good friend. I will not stand by and see him hurt."

"Indeed. Then we are in agreement. We must monitor him carefully."

"I'll bring him down for medical tests, see if I can find the proof you will need to relieve him under regulations." McCoy shook his head. "I wish I didn't have to do this."

"Very well, Doctor," Spock said, turning to leave, but McCoy stopped him.

"Will you join me for a drink, Mr. Spock?" he asked. "I have an excellent bottle of Saurian brandy."

The Doctor gave a start at the cold stare he received.

"Vulcans do not participate in meaningless social activities."

"Well, excuse me!" McCoy retorted angrily. "I forgot for a moment just how Vulcan you are. For a moment I thought that perhaps you had a heart." He laughed a little at his own foolishness. "If Jim asked you, would you have given *him* the same answer you gave me?"

Spock's eyes narrowed as he considered the question. "No," he replied.

Startled by the blunt honesty behind that reply, McCoy's eyes widened in surprise. "What would you have said?" he asked curiously.

"I would have told him that although I do not drink alcohol, I would sit with him while he took a drink."

"Well, I'll be damned!" McCoy exclaimed, a little hurt. "Why should you not do that for me?"

"You are not my friend," Spock replied tonelessly. "If you will excuse me, Doctor."

Speechless with anger, McCoy stared after him.

Christine Chapel stood in the doorway. She had heard the last part of the exchange and sympathised with Dr. McCoy, but she could not help but marvel at the cool honesty of the First Officer. She envied Kirk more than ever, having the friendship of such a being as Mr. Spock. She had heard all the rumours and read all that there was on the Vulcan people. How could sentient beings not know love? It was impossible. All races loved in some way.

She imagined what it must be like to be held in such strong arms. She had seen how he had so easily tossed the Captain - himself a powerful man - during the famous training sessions. What

kind of strength could throw a man like Kirk? A picture of Spock flashed through her mind. He was standing across from her, his upper body covered with bruises and cuts, oblivious of the pain from them, only concerned with his injured Captain's welfare. His body was so lean - thin almost - yet power exuded from him, untapped, but there waiting to be released. She shivered as she fantasised what it would be like being the lover of such a being.

"Damn unfeeling Vulcan," McCoy muttered.

Christine jumped and quickly backed away into the other room.

Kirk came out of his shower, wearily made his way over to the intercom and called his First Officer. Spock's face filled the screen.

"Mr. Spock, I must apologise to you again. I... forgot the time."

He felt guiltier than ever and furious with himself. He and Spock had been in training for months now, always at the same time of day unless an emergency prevented it. Forgetting the time was a very lame excuse; unfortunately it was the truth. He had been with Sara. She made him forget everything and everyone but her. He closed his eyes in an attempt to gather his exhausted thoughts together.

"Are you all right, sir?" Spock's worried tone reached him.

"Yes, Spock. It's late, and I'm tired." He leaned forward for the illusion of being nearer the calm and relaxing presence of his friend. "I promise you I'll not miss my Tzunaar training tomorrow."

"Very well, Captain. But you will have to work doubly hard to make up. If you miss the training you lose fitness. I have told you that before. The training must be maintained; a regular programme must be adhered to."

Kirk smiled a little, not minding the reprimand, knowing he deserved it and worse. "I'll be very glad to work doubly hard, Spock," he said. "I'll look forward to it."

Spock raised his eyebrow. "I too, Jim," he said.

Kirk's smile widened. "You just want to throw me all over the gymnasium."

The other eyebrow climbed. "There is a certain satisfaction in doing so."

Spock always made him feel better, Kirk realised once again. He sighed as he turned off the intercom, and wondered at his Vulcan friend. For one who professed to have no feelings, Spock was magnanimous in his forgiveness of his constantly bad-tempered and ignorant Captain. He did not deserve such a friend.

He lay down on his bed and stretched out. Sara had wanted him to stay with her, but he had somehow found the will to refuse. Being constantly with her in his off-duty hours was proving tiresome, exhausting and even boring. He had never met a woman so insatiable. What had been at first stimulating and extremely

pleasurable - exciting beyond belief - was becoming too debilitating. The constant diet of sex she fed him was purely a physical stimulation - almost predictable now. Kirk liked women with intelligence, spirit, mystery; women who pleased him, but expected him to please them in return.

Also, he wondered why she wanted him to take her to the Zmarran system. She had grown angry when he had refused her, and that had interested him, but he had forgotten in the heat of her attentions to him. For a moment, he wondered if he should turn the ship around for Zmarra. Surely there were other ships who could respond to the Scotia's distress call?

The voice encouraged him. *Yes, take the ship to Zmarra. It is where you want to go.*

He struggled with it. No. He would not do it. He had his orders, his duty. His responsibility lay with that damaged, perhaps destroyed, Federation vessel.

He sat up. He had fallen asleep. Had it been a dream? Had Sara's voice telling him to go to Zmarra been part of a nightmare, like the ones he used to have about Gary? He shuddered. What was she doing to him? What had she done to him? He had to find out. There was something sinister at work. Spock had been correct, as he always was.

Quickly dressing, he gathered up his resolve and will, forcing himself to banish lethargy and exhaustion. Determined to find out what Sara was really up to, he made his way to her cabin.

She awaited him with a seductive smile on her lips.

He tried to hold onto his resolve. Why did it always abandon him around her? "Sara, why do you want to go to Zmarra?"

"I cannot give you a reason," she replied, sliding her arms about his neck. "It is enough that I wish it." She kissed his neck, her hands reached for the sensitive parts of his body she now knew so well, but he grabbed her roughly and held her back.

"Sara, tell me the truth," he demanded, shaking her.

Her eyes filled with tears. "You are hurting me," she whispered.

Her expression, her vulnerability, softened his will and he released her, unable to bear the large pain-filled eyes upon him. He saw the red imprint of his hands on the soft skin of her arms, and shame hit him at his roughness. She threw herself into his arms crying softly.

"Sara," he murmured, holding her gently. "Sara, I didn't mean to hurt you..."

Her lips found his and he knew he was lost. He had no chance against this woman's compelling power over him. His body betrayed him every time.

He lay in a stupor, Sara's voice in his ear pleading with him to take her to Zmarra. All during the lovemaking she had repeated

her request as she manipulated his responses, giving him intolerable feelings which were no longer pleasurable but agonising. He had been like putty in her hands - used. Helpless. A victim of her nightmarish ability. But he had somehow found the strength within him to refuse her demand. He would not take her where she wanted to go. He struggled against the nauseating, heavy feeling in his head. He had to leave her, never to return to her. She was dangerous - she was destroying him!

Slowly, his head cleared and with great relief, he opened his eyes.

NIGHTMARE!!

Gary lay there, smiling his familiar mocking smile...

Kirk closed his eyes again. He was dreaming. He shook himself; he had to wake up. Slowly he opened his eyes again. Nothing had changed; Gary was still there, his eyes twinkling with amusement, studying him.

"Gary?" Kirk whispered, hesitantly reaching out to touch the phantom presence. The shoulder he touched was real - firm. "Gary, how can it be you?"

"Jim," the well remembered voice said to him. "Do you miss me, old friend? You don't have to miss me."

"Gary - " Jim sat up - "I miss you. I wish I'd not had to kill you."

He broke off in horror. He had killed Gary, buried him alive in a grave on the planet Delta Vega, after that horrendous, vicious fight. It had been a battle to the death; Kirk had known that only one of them would survive. His eyes filled. "Gary, it can't be you. I am in a nightmare. You are a phantom in my nightmare."

"No, Jim," Gary said with a smile. "I am very, very real."

He reached for Jim and stroked him in the way Sara had done; a way which had always aroused him before. Horror swept through Jim in a sickening wave as he suddenly realised that he was not dreaming this. He flung himself from the bed, landed on his knees on the floor and sprang to his feet. Escape! He had to escape!

Caught from behind by a grip which pinioned him mercilessly, he struggled violently in fear and pain, Gary's voice murmuring in his ear, "Take me to Zmarra, Jim."

"NO!" he cried as he twisted and turned in the hold of his dead friend. His legs shook as he felt the intense heat from the naked body behind him. Blind terror held him prisoner in the grip of his deepest, most terrifying nightmare.

SPOCK! he cried in his mind. *SPOCK!!!*

A sudden vision of his Vulcan friend's concerned face brought him some control over himself. His training in the many martial arts returned to him, and he was able, with a Vulcan technique, to set himself free.

Gary laughed, his eyes taking on the silvery hue Kirk remembered so well. "You won't escape me, Jim. Not this time."

He lurched forward and with a swift movement grabbed Kirk in a stranglehold, twisted him around and forced him onto his knees. Kirk cried out in pain as his arms were pinned above him, as Gary's hard knee pressed into the small of his back.

"Take me to Zmarra, Jim."

"Who are you?" Kirk gasped.

"Gary, your loving friend," came the sinister reply.

With a sudden jerk of his arms, Kirk pulled Gary off-balance, knocking him over. He struggled to stand; he had to get to the intercom, he had to summon help, but his strength was deserting him, his determination was failing him, he was drained... exhausted... Hands grabbed at his ankles, bringing him down to the ground with painful force. Twisting onto his back, he kicked wildly, trying to dislodge the tight grip upon him. A few moments later he was free, but Gary's body slammed down on top of him, the face looming above him, leering in a horrific smile.

SPOCK! Kirk silently cried again.

He pressed his hands up against Gary's chin, pushing him away, managing to press him back and knock him onto his side. He punched him with his remaining waning strength, but Gary laughed as the ineffectual blow glanced off him; raising his fist, he slammed it into Kirk's jaw with sickening force. With a cry of pain, Kirk fell back, blood streaming from his cut lip.

"You cannot defeat me," Gary said. "I'll beat you senseless if I have to, but I will win and then I will do just what I want with you. There is only one way you can stop this. *Take me to Zmarra.*"

"Gary," Jim murmured through bruised and bloodied lips.
"Gary... I'm sorry."

He knew that what was happening was impossible. Gary was dead. But the evidence before his exhausted and weakened will was painfully real. This was Gary in every way. Unable to think coherently, he could only accept that Gary was back, out for vengeance, and this time with no scruples about taking what he wanted. He struggled with his body, trying to force it to obey him.

The look on Gary's face was vicious as he knelt over Kirk, straddling him. With deliberate intent, he aimed hard punches at Kirk's body. In an attempt to escape the punishing blows Kirk curled up, trying to protect himself, lashing out with elbow and fist in a desperate bid to find a weak spot in his attacker.

The ballad Spock played on his lyre was an ancient one. It told of the sacrifices of the warrior Sendel for his t'hy'la Sivan. It was an inspiring tale and one Spock had never understood until recently. The words clarified themselves in his mind as his hands played the melody. Sendel had willingly gone into battle against the Goddess T'Kab - she who was the evil one - to save Sivan's life. His mentor the Goddess T'Lir had given him shields of power to protect his innermost self, but to save Sivan he had been forced to lower those precious shields. He had exposed his mind to the bitterest torments a telepath could suffer. He had put his friend's life above his own, and had almost died. The torture he had -

SPOCK! The cry of anguish reverberated through his mind.

The lyre fell from his nerveless fingers.

He was halfway out of the door when the second cry jarred his senses. Quickening his pace, he ran to the turbolift, trying to stifle the terror - both his and Kirk's - which was within him. Those distress calls had held all the horror of living nightmare, and he trembled inside with the shocks his Captain had transmitted along with his desperate pleas.

Jim, he tried to call in silent reassurance. I am on my way to you.

He slammed his fist against the bulkhead. Why was the lift taking such a long time? He counted the seconds as they slowly, interminably passed by.

At last he heard the welcome hiss of the opening door and he rushed in. "Deck two," he ordered, knowing for certain where his Captain would be. "Faster," he urged the lift control. "Faster." He knew it was illogical - the lift could not understand, and even if it could it was unable to move at a greater speed. He leaned his head back against the wall, his heart beating wildly, growing ever more fearful for Kirk as every moment passed. *Jim!* he called silently. *Jim!*

SPOCK! came the third plea for help as the lift came to a halt.

He sped down the corridor, scattering bewildered crew out of his way, unaware of them in his concentration to reach his friend. After what seemed an interminable time, he reached the guest quarters assigned to Lady Sara-Marisson Ianddi, to find the door locked.

Although normally a strict respecter of another's privacy, Spock did not hesitate to use the emergency override code. A few seconds later he was inside. He had not known what to expect, but it had not been what now greeted his horrified eyes; the sight of Gary Mitchell standing over Kirk aiming vicious kicks at the vulnerable naked body sent chills of fear and nausea through the stoic Vulcan.

Without a thought for his own safety, he launched himself at Mitchell, forcing him away from Kirk. A hard punch knocked him back a pace, but he grabbed Mitchell, turned him around and applied his fingers to the base of Mitchell's neck. Spock had never known the nerve pinch to fail, but it did now, and that confirmed to him that whatever he fought, it was certainly not Human.

A tenuous telepathic touch grazed against his mind. Quickly, he lowered his surface barriers and tried to make contact. Mitchell struggled to break free, but Spock increased the pressure. He did not know what type of entity he battled; he only knew it was not Mitchell nor was it Sara, but some kind of shape-shifter able to take their form, something totally alien to all they knew.

Now he realised the torment his Captain had endured at the hands of this creature as the telepathic images flickered through his mind. This shape-changing being had been able to draw on the Human, not unlike the vampires of Earth legend. It had sapped Kirk's will and strength, and when the Captain had still been able to resist its demands, it had changed its shape and tactics to try

fear and violence.

No, he sent a silent order. You have lost.

It struggled violently in his hold as the force of Spock's physical and mental power began to weaken it. Spock held on, not daring to spare a moment to glance at the crumpled body lying at his feet. He maintained the pressure on the alien being until it surrendered.

The form he grasped shimmered and changed. Tremors of shock swept through him when he saw his mother struggling in his arms. For a split second he almost let go, but reason prevailed. His mother, Lady Amanda, was on Vulcan - safe - not here on the Enterprise. He tightened his hold further. The creature cried out with his mother's voice. "Spock, my darling, my son." Her lovely expressive Human eyes stared up at him, pleading. "Spock, release me."

With Vulcan control, Spock forced his filial feelings away - he would not allow himself to soften.

The image of his mother wavered, changed... Sarek's form solidified.

My son, it said in his mind. Release me and I will forgive you.

Spock's heart leapt with joy. To have his father's forgiveness after all these years - but his logical, rational mind quickly rejected his Human hope.

"No, you are not my father," he stated.

Sarek dissolved and reshaped as the child T'Pring. Spock gasped as the small body wriggled to break free. "Parted from me and never parted," it said. "I await thee."

"You are not T'Pring," Spock said. "Reveal your true self."

T'Pring grew, her features changed, her body altered into that of a Human male - Kirk.

"Spock, please let go of me. Spock - you who are my brother. I have been and always shall be your friend."

Fury at this creature who mimicked and ridiculed all those whom Spock valued strengthened his resolve to defeat it. He drew within, concentrating on releasing the deep telepathic power of ancient times, the untapped force of the Vulcan warrior he knew lay dormant deep in the pathways of his mind. Grasping it, he sent it hurtling - like a phaser blast - through the alien mind.

The Kirk-form dissolved as the almost killing force of the Vulcan sapped the strength of the shape-changer. It cried out in pain and slowly reformed into its natural form; gratefully it sank into the long awaited normality of its true self.

It hung limply in Spock's arms, unconscious; a long, thin, grey, gelatinous form, vaguely humanoid in shape, with a narrow pointed face, and straggly, stringlike hair. Carefully, Spock lowered it to the ground, assured that it could not cause further harm.

Spock knelt by his Captain, turned him over gently, and sighed with relief to see him conscious, a shocked but lucid expression in his eyes. He took in Kirk's condition at a glance; blood oozed from several cuts, bruises darkened his skin - Spock could feel the pain from him. For a moment he touched his fingertips to Kirk's, initiating the tingling sensation of their bond of friendship.

"I am here, Jim," he said simply. "All will be well."

Kirk's eyes acknowledged his words, but he did not speak - he could not. The shock of the attack by Gary was unbearable, horrifying. He shivered violently. Faintly he heard Spock call McCoy to the room and he relaxed, allowing his Vulcan friend to take control. Spock was with him, all would be well, but the shivering would not stop, even when a cover was wrapped around him. His head was gently placed upon a pillow, but the throbbing aches did not cease; his discomfort persisted.

He was vaguely aware of movement around him, then there was silence and a warmer than Human touch upon his forehead. Gratefully he submitted to the comforting warmth, trusting himself to the safe familiarity of Healing. He knew this place, he had been here before; this was where he wanted to be, this was his haven - the only place where his guilt and pain would be eased.

SPOCK!

He jerked himself away. No! He was not going to burden Spock. He could not allow Spock to take *his* pain! He had seen what that could do to his telepathic friend. The shivering returned as all the hurt in his bruised limbs hit him full force, as the shock of the attack hit him anew. Gary!...

"Jim," the voice pleaded. "Jim."

Another voice intruded. "Jim..."

The hum of the mediscanner was a welcome sound. He felt the cold pressure of the hypo against his arm and he drifted into welcome sleep.

The sounds of sickbay soothed him and he sighed deeply, knowing he was safe in McCoy's capable hands.

"He's coming around now, Doctor," a woman's voice said.

"Jim," McCoy's unmistakeable Georgia drawl insisted. "Jim. Wake up. You're all right now, everything is going to be just fine." He felt the touch of the Doctor's hand on his arm. "C'mon, Jim..."

His eyelids were so heavy, he was so tired, too tired to make the effort to lift them. Another hypo shot in his arm brought fresh vitality through his system; the heaviness began to ease and he found himself able to open his eyes. Instinctively, he looked to his right and met dark, concerned alien eyes.

Not surprised to see the Vulcan there, he asked, "How did you know, Spock?"

Spock stood stiffly, his eyes lowered now. "I heard you, sir."

Jim's eyes widened in surprise. Spock had heard him! How was that possible? He could not understand...

"Jim, how do you feel now?" McCoy asked.

Kirk turned to him. "Much better. What did you give me?"

"A vitaliser shot. You're very lucky, Jim. If Mr. Spock had not found you when he did, you could have been very seriously injured. As it is, that alien shape-changer worked you over. I've given you medication for the pain and swelling. It works fast. You'll be on your feet in a day or two."

"I'll have to be. We rendezvous at the Scotia's co-ordinates soon."

"Twenty three point three two solar hours, Captain," Spock confirmed.

A smile spread over Kirk's face and he turned to give his friend a questioning look. "I believe you, Spock, but I don't understand how you know that so accurately."

"It is a minor Vulcan ability, sir."

"I see," Kirk replied, staring at Spock curiously, wondering still how he had heard him, how he had known where to find him, how he had saved him? Spock shifted slightly under his Captain's intense scrutiny.

"Sir, I have interrogated the prisoner."

"Jim, can't this wait?" McCoy asked. "You're still in shock."

"No," Kirk said in his command tone. "I must hear Mr. Spock's report. Please excuse us." He did not take his eyes from his study of his First Officer.

McCoy shook his head, nodded to the nurse and they both left their Captain's bedside.

There was a long silence as Kirk continued to stare at Spock. He thought of the debt he owed this man; this Vulcan. Once again he had been saved by him, this time from the severest of physical and mental abuse. Kirk had no doubt that the alien would have stopped at nothing to get its way, but... Spock had *heard* him...

"How?" he finally asked. "How did you hear me?"

The Vulcan's eyes reluctantly met his. "You called me."

"I called you?! How did I call you?" Kirk asked confusedly.

"In your mind. You called me three times, Jim. The great distress you were in, I believe, must have magnified the power of your call." His embarrassment was obvious, but he continued in his honest assessment of the situation. "We are joined in brotherhood in the Vulcan way. My telepathy is strong, even for a Vulcan. It will always bring me to you, if you need me."

Kirk was stunned. He did not remember calling, but he must

have cried out for him, silently, desperately; those Vulcan senses had heard him, bringing Spock to his rescue. He tried to control the deep emotion threatening to overcome him. He did not deserve such a friend. How could he have... How had he forged such a link with Spock? He wanted to reach out, grasp his hand, hold him in a tight hug, show him his gratitude the way he would with any person who had done so much for him; but he forcibly restrained his impulses as he saw Spock had read him and had stepped back in alarm. Spock, closer to him than any other, yet still wary of his touch at times.

"Report," he said, in an attempt to normalise the situation.

Immediately, Spock fell into the procedure of routine. "The alien is weakened now, sir. It will cause no further disturbance. It is confined in the brig. The being comes from the Zmarran Star system."

"That's where she wanted me to take her!" Kirk exclaimed.

That was where Sara had wanted to go. Where Gary had wanted - No. Not Gary. Some alien shape shifter who had found the image of Gary in his mind. He tried to restrain the deep horror he felt from showing openly.

"Indeed," Spock said, "and it had cause to go there. However, its methods were manipulative and vicious.

"Many hundreds of years ago, the Zmarran people were enslaved by invaders from a neighbouring world. They suffered great indignities, but fought against their oppressors. Many of them died. The resistance leaders devised a plan. The bravest of their fighters would attempt to escape the planet to try to find help outside their system. The being we rescued was one such fighter. It had found its way to the Spican system during the Klingon attack; its ship was damaged beyond repair."

"It docked with Lady Sara's craft only to find it also damaged and the woman close to death. The only hope of survival was to use the ship's cryogenic chamber. As it was set for Human life-forms, it had to alter its body shape to become Lady Sara, the only example there was. It fused with her mind, taking all the information she could supply, then it disposed of her body and entered cryogenic suspension. When rescued, it realised it would have to keep the form it had become used to for ten years."

He paused for a long moment, hesitating over his next words. "Especially when it surmised the effect the beauty of such a woman had on the one man who had the power to help it."

Kirk could not understand. He reached for his First Officer's logical reasoning. "Why didn't it tell me? Why use such crude methods to try to force me?"

Spock shook his head, his sympathy for his Captain, the pointlessness of his suffering, uppermost in his thoughts.

"It is an illogical creature. In its natural habitat it uses the ability to shape change to please its mate or scare its enemies. It can read images, desires from other minds; an ability more empathic than telepathic. It lacks the natural intelligence to reason as you or I would do. It only knew that it needed this starship to return to its enslaved people and that the Captain of

that starship could be susceptible to certain desires."

Kirk laughed harshly. "I was easy prey. I allowed my male hormones to lead me. What happened to my intellect, Spock? Was I so sex-starved that I allowed some alien - something you refer to as 'it' - to use me?"

Embarrassed by the turn of the discussion, Spock looked down at his boots. "Captain, it took your natural instincts and artificially magnified them in an attempt to control you."

"It did a damn good job!" Kirk said scathingly. "What kind of Starship Captain am I, to forget myself so?"

He stared at the Vulcan. "You tried to warn me. I ignored you, lost my temper at you. I treated you shamefully." Spock looked up to see the haunted expression in the Human eyes. "Bones too. He knew something was wrong."

"Jim, do not be so harsh on yourself."

"I was just ripe for the picking," Kirk continued. "I was no better than an animal in rut."

Worried by Kirk's self-reproaching anger, Spock tried to reassure him. "Captain, you must not condemn yourself. It is unnecessary. It is *illogical*."

"Condemn myself!" Kirk exclaimed bitterly. "Of course I condemn myself. I was thinking with my glands instead of my brains." He closed his eyes as the humiliation of his behaviour overcame him. "What must you think of me, Spock?" he murmured miserably as the thought of the Vulcan's respect for him being lessened weighed heavily upon him. He could not bear accusation from such a friend as Spock. He would not be able to stand Spock's condemnation.

"Jim, I do not judge you. It is not my place to do so. You must not torment yourself with illogical fears concerning me."

Kirk met the honest, steadfast gaze which held no censure, no contempt, no condemnation. His eyes filled with tears.

"I do not think any less of you, Jim. I have given you my loyalty; I would not entrust that to one who was unworthy of it. Please, do not be distressed." He held out his hand, unable to stop himself from offering a compassionate touch.

Kirk eagerly grasped his hand. "Thank you, Spock. What would I do without you?" He hung onto the solid reality of the tight Vulcan grip. "You always bring me solace. You make me see things in the right perspective."

"Only if you will allow it, Jim," Spock responded, a faint touch of criticism in his tone.

Kirk bit his lip, knowing what Spock meant. He could not meet the concerned Vulcan eyes now. He had been avoiding Spock's requests to discuss the deaths on Delta Vega for weeks now; he had been running from his grief, bottling it all up inside him. He honestly did not want to cause Spock pain; he knew that if he allowed those telepathic senses to touch him, the effect on Spock would be devastating, but he was also aware that in rejecting the

offer of help, he was causing him hurt. There had to be a way round it!

The warmth of the alien hand penetrated through to his confusion, somehow easing it and clarifying his thoughts.

"Once I'm on my feet, after we've determined what happened to the Scotia, I will... We will... I would be grateful if you would help me sort out my problems. Perhaps the meditation?..." he broke off, seeing the fleeting expression of happiness on the Vulcan face.

"I would be deeply honoured," Spock said, bowing over their clasped hands.

Kirk stared at the bent head in wonder. No man could have a better friend. No man had ever called a Vulcan friend - except himself, James T. Kirk. He had very quickly learned the value of such a friendship. He had once called it a gift beyond price. He knew now that even that could not adequately describe it.

It drifted in space. The most advanced espionage ship in the Federation, its hull penetrated by an unknown force. The crew - unless they had escaped in lifeboats - would have had no chance of survival.

As he listened to the reports of his crew, Kirk watched the Scotia. It was derelict now, nothing left to show that it had once boasted the finest technology of the United Federation of Planets. He tried to concentrate on his Science Officer's words, but his mind kept returning to the Zmarran and how it had used him. He shuddered.

"Captain?" Spock's voice was low, but sharp. Kirk shook himself. "Captain, are you all right?"

Kirk glanced up to see the Vulcan standing close to him. He swallowed. "Yes, Mr. Spock - I am listening."

The intense Vulcan stare sent a ripple of alarm through Kirk and he immediately sat bolt upright on his chair. He had been slipping again, giving in to the memory of his shame. Somehow, he had to cast it aside; his people depended on him - he had no time for self-recriminations.

"Captain," Sulu's voice penetrated, the urgency in his tone obvious. "Something at the edge of scanner range approaching us at warp speed."

Kirk jumped to his feet. "Yellow alert," he ordered as he moved over to the helm. He leaned over, studying Sulu's scanner. "What is that?" he murmured as he tried to make sense of the readings. He straightened, turned to the Science station and walked over to the railing. "Mr. Spock?" he began.

Spock did not take his eyes from his viewer. "I have never encountered such readings before, Captain. I would suggest suitable precautions be taken."

"Yes, Mr. Spock. Perhaps what destroyed the Scotia is now about to attempt to do the same with us," Kirk said. "Red alert! Battle stations!" He returned to the command chair and sat down,

his eyes riveted on the viewer as Uhura's voice repeated his order. He had no worries about his crew; he knew that within minutes they would all be at their assigned posts waiting for the encounter, prepared for any eventuality. He watched and waited as the unknown craft approached them until it filled the viewscreen.

He studied it. It was only half as large as the Enterprise, but its sleek line spoke of power and swiftness - like some ancient mythic beast. Kirk gave a start. No time for such fanciful thoughts. "Open a channel to that ship, Lt. Uhura," he said.

Uhura turned to him. "There's no response, sir. They're receiving me, but do not reply."

"Keep trying. Patch me in." He threw off the remaining vestiges of his tiredness and strain - he could not afford to be below par in this potentially hazardous situation. "This is Captain James Kirk of the USS Enterprise. We are responding to a distress call from one of our ships. You will see it has been damaged. Can you assist us in any way?"

There was a long moment of silence before Uhura heard the response. "Message coming in, sir. On audio only."

Kirk nodded. "Let's hear it."

The voice which filled the bridge was deep and harsh. "You come to fight us, but I warn you, we are more than a match for you. Prepare for death."

"We do not wish to fight you -" Kirk began.

"Captain, they have closed communications," Uhura said.

"They are firing, Captain," Spock called. "An energy of a type I have never seen."

Immediately, Kirk gave the order to return fire. He sat tensely in the command chair, waiting for the alien beam to hit their shields, not knowing if it would damage them, even penetrate them. He did not have long to wait. His ship rocked wildly under the impact, but the shields held. Bridge crew were thrown out of their seats, but all quickly picked themselves up and returned to their stations.

"We hit them," Sulu reported. "One of their shields is damaged."

"All decks report minor injuries," Uhura said. "Damage control reports no serious damage to the Enterprise."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Kirk turned to his First Officer. "Recommendations, Mr. Spock?" he asked.

Spock swivelled around, his expression showing puzzlement. "Most illogical, Captain. Why should they want to attack us? There is no reason. This area is free space - no race claims it - yet it would appear that they destroyed the Scotia and now wish to fight us."

"Can you prove they attacked the Scotia?" Kirk asked.

"Indeed," Spock replied. "The damage to the hull of the Scotia

clearly indicates the - "

"Later, Spock," Kirk interrupted.

"But surely you will need the evidence for your log before you can justify your next actions regarding - "

"Spock," Kirk said patiently, "if you say the evidence is there, I will trust your judgement. I need nothing else."

Silently, Spock returned to his console, a strange tight feeling in his throat. Quickly, he logged all the details for future reference; if by any chance he did not survive this encounter, his Captain would be safe from inquiry. Kirk's trust in him was a grave responsibility and a terrifying one. He could not fail the one who relied on him so heavily. He would not fail him.

He heard Kirk's words to the alien ship, and turned around to watch with interest. Kirk never failed to surprise him, and he was not disappointed.

"If you attack us again, we will defend ourselves. We have powerful weapons at our disposal - do not underestimate us. This is a Starship. Who are you - tell us what you want?"

"Visual contact," Uhura said as her fingers spread over her console boosting the alien's signal, screening out all unnecessary noises.

"On screen," Kirk ordered.

He waited in restless silence as the alien appeared. It was of humanoid appearance; long white hair surrounded a pale thin face; the eyes gleamed in a deep red shade, and its lips were dark cobalt blue. It wore a silver hued garment, with strange unknown symbols adorning the sleeves.

The being's mouth opened to reveal teeth studded with glittering jewels. "We wish to battle with you."

Kirk frowned. "But why? Who are you? We mean you no harm."

"I am Lyrond, Commander of the Gya war fleet. We are conquerors of lesser species. We have spread throughout our neighbouring star systems; now we wish to cast our net wider."

"Commander Lyrond," Kirk said, "we represent a United Federation of many species. We do not seek to conquer, but to live in peace, exchange ideas and knowledge, and work together for the greater good of us all."

Lyrond laughed. "That is the talk of weaklings. There are only the conquerors or the conquered. That is our way."

Kirk glanced over at Spock. His friend's eyes were on him and he drew a little strength from that supporting look. He was aware that all the crew were awaiting his decision, looking at him to guide them safely out of this. He had to do the correct thing; he could not afford to make a mistake - yet there was something in him that wanted just to run away, to give the responsibility to someone else, to hide...

He pulled himself together. He had to hold on, overcome these

aggressive alien intruders; then he could relax, then he would allow Spock to heal him. He concentrated for a long moment, gathered all of his determination and pondered their situation. A show of strength was what the aliens might respect. Well, he would give them that easily enough. He could be aggressive also - if he chose.

"It is not our way, Commander. But I warn you that we are not weaklings. We will defend what is ours. You are close to Federation territory, and you will go no further. You have destroyed one of our ships and have attacked another without provocation. You must justify that or take the consequences."

"We need not justify our actions to you. We are the Gya."

"Why did you destroy the ship?" Kirk asked, angered by the arrogance of the alien commander.

"It was in our path," Lyrond said. "That was enough. It was an excellent target for our new weapon. They could not resist us."

"There were living beings aboard that ship," Kirk said.

"Inferior life," the alien said. "We are the superior ones."

Kirk smiled. If the alien had known him he would have recognised the danger. "We have heard others with that viewpoint. No, Commander, that is not the belief of any of the members of the Federation. All life is sacred to us, all are equal. We do not adhere to any philosophy of master races. We will not allow anyone to impose their will upon another. I offer you two choices." He leaned forward, his attention deeply intent upon the screen. "We will not allow you to encroach any further into this area. We are committed to the protection of the Federation and will not be intimidated by you. You may stand and fight if you wish, but if we do not defeat you, the others from our Fleet will do so. You cannot win against our might. Or you may return to your own territory, where you will stay until you are civilised enough to respect others. You have five solar minutes to decide." He indicated to Uhura to break the connection, then sat back in his chair and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

The bridge was silent except for the background hum which was always present. All the crew watched their instruments, occasionally taking a moment to glance at their Captain, but Kirk sat motionless.

The incoming message arrived in four minutes thirty five seconds. Lyrond seemed to hesitate before he spoke. "We are the Gya. We are all powerful."

Kirk noted with satisfaction that he did not appear as arrogant as before. "No," he replied. "Not in this part of the galaxy. Here we control. I will demonstrate my power to you." Kirk leaned forward. "Mr. Sulu, fire photon torpedoes, wide dispersal. I want him scared."

Sulu grinned widely. "Aye, sir."

Kirk watched as the alien tried to dodge the barrage, waiting for the next message with fingers crossed. It came within a minute.

"Captain Kirk, we did not know. We had no idea we were in your domain. We do not wish to anger the Federation. With your

permission we will withdraw."

There were smiles of appreciation all around the bridge, but one face showed a trace of puzzlement.

"Where is your home system?" Kirk snapped.

Lyrond's face showed fear. "We will not attack any of your vessels again. It was an error - I beg your understanding."

Kirk sat silently for several minutes, and watched as the tension in the alien increased. Finally he spoke, and intentionally, he made his voice harsh. "I tell you this, Lyrond. We are aware of you now, and if you touch any of our ships again, we will not hesitate to find you. Do not doubt that we have the technology. You were lucky - if you had encountered the Klingons you would have been dead or enslaved by now. Return to your home; perhaps one day we will meet again. I hope by then you will have learned that co-operation is a better way than warfare."

Lyrond seemed to shrink into himself. "We will obey you, Captain Kirk. We will return home. We will not bother you again."

"Make sure you do not."

As they watched the retreat of the Gya ship, Kirk felt the presence of his First Officer beside him. "Well, Mr. Spock?"

The dark eyes gazed at him with confusion. "Captain, why did you take such an aggressive stance with him? How could you possibly have known he would retreat?"

Kirk chuckled slightly. "I couldn't, Mr. Spock. But he was a bully. Most bullies are cowards when faced with someone who is stronger than they are. I was hoping that he would be afraid to face us once he realised we were not an easy target. The Scotia was easy for them, but to take on a starship..."

"It was an unreliable and risky method to use, if I may say so. There was no logic to it."

"I am an illogical Human, Spock," Kirk said with a sudden weary sigh. He rubbed at his eyes and leaned back.

Spock stared at him, noting the strain the alien encounter had placed on the already exhausted Human. "Captain, will you not rest now? The crisis is over. Allow me to attend to the final details."

Kirk almost retorted with a sharp reply but he bit it back, knowing that Spock was only trying to help him. He had asked for that help, and he must allow himself to accept it. He nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Spock, I'll do as you suggest. When you're finished cleaning all this up you'll find me in my quarters."

He saw the expression in Spock's eyes change as the First Officer realised his meaning. He stood up, smiled a little, then slowly made his way from the bridge.

Spock's eyes were warm as he stared after the retreating figure. Now he would be able to do his duty by his chosen brother; this time he would not shirk it - this time he would go to the very root of the problem.

He felt Uhura's curious eyes upon him, and he caught himself. He glanced at her sharply and she quickly turned her attention to her console. Spock sat in the command chair and efficiently began to organise the investigation of the wreck of the Scotia, but a part of him marvelled at his Captain, able - even after all he had been through - to deal with a difficult confrontation with an alien being, correctly assessing the situation and judging the response to counter the alien's aggression. How had Kirk done it? How had one so drained - still shocked - been able to reach into himself and find the solution? His admiration for Kirk's character and strength, the instinctive command abilities, deepened.

Spock knew that he would not have dealt with the alien in that way, and he realised that there was much he needed to learn from Kirk if he was to be a successful First Officer to him. He would not want Jim to be disappointed in him in any way; he would strive to understand those qualities which made Kirk such a natural leader, and attempt to apply himself to learn them. But he wondered if they could possibly be learned, or if, mysteriously, they were just a part of his Captain's personality.

He anticipated a most interesting time in his study of his Captain.

Relieved that his Captain had agreed to accompany him to the privacy cubicle, Spock walked at his side, trying to keep a measured pace so as not to appear to be hurrying. Jim's stress levels were higher than ever; McCoy's mediscanner had recorded it, but Vulcan telepathic senses caught the actuality of it, the Human suffering from it. Spock wondered how he was going to obtain the co-operation needed for the deep meld.

Locking the door behind them, he hesitated for several moments before he turned around. He had no plan, no prepared speech - nothing. He would have to operate by instinct - something which did not come easily to him. He must draw on his submerged Human heritage, the very gut feelings he had fought so hard to contain and erase. Was Kirk worth such turmoil? Was the friendship of this Human worth it?

Yes, he answered the doubts silently. He is worth it. Yes, his friendship is of the greatest importance to me. We are tied in the ancient way.

The Captain stood silently staring out of the observation port, fascinated as he always was by the moving galaxy he travelled through, marvelling at its beauty. Yet, not for the first time, he questioned why he had chosen this wandering life with its many dangers and unknowns. He could have had a quiet life somewhere on a Federation world with a wife and family, the choice of many careers and the opportunity to watch his children grow up, with a woman he loved by his side.

Shaking his head fractionally, he dismissed the rosy picture of domestic life. It was not to be. He was too restless. Seeking out the unknown was his reason for being here; it was what he wanted to do, it was who he was and what he was, an explorer, a commander of like-minded people. He had no regrets.

Sensing Spock by his shoulder, he sighed deeply. The Vulcan First Officer had become his most trusted friend; always calm and

dependable, always logical, yet somewhere beneath that mask of non-emotion lay a caring and understanding heart. Kirk knew why Spock had brought him here; the First Officer had been trying to talk with him for weeks now and, fool that he was, he had always avoided it. It was time to stop the running, he could not continue under this pressure for much longer. He had asked for Spock's help, and now was the time to accept it and allow his friend to ease the pain through helping him relax and meditate. He wanted that help so badly now that he had almost run here in his eagerness - only strict discipline had checked his stride.

He turned to face his friend, looking up into the calm Vulcan face.

Spock straightened his shoulders and looked down into his Captain's face, seeing the almost-acceptance there. That gave him the encouragement to speak plainly.

"Captain, I have observed you closely since the incident at the Galactic barrier and I believe that - " He paused on seeing the change in Kirk's expressive eyes, wishing he had a better understanding of the nuances of Human language, of the correct usage of words in such sensitive circumstances. "Mr. Mitchell's death was inevitable, given what he had become." He fervently wished for the precision of the Vulcan language with its many shades of meaning, as he felt the rising tide of anger and rejection in Kirk. "Captain, you must accept his death and the events surrounding it. Logic dictates that you must not continue in this manner for your ship, your crew, need you. It is illogical to - " He broke off as he saw the fury on Kirk's face, wondering what he had said to so anger the Human.

"Illogical!" Kirk shouted in a tone which set Vulcan hearing on edge.

Receiving the full force of Kirk's anger, Spock stepped back hurriedly as the distraught Human, full of unleashed pain from the loss of Gary, Lee and Elizabeth, and now Sara - with all the humiliation and horror the Zmarran had made him endure - was unable to contain himself any more.

"Damn you, I can't be as logical and unfeeling about death as you are. I am Human and have deep emotions. Gary was my closest friend for years. It's my fault he's dead, my fault Lee and Elizabeth died, my fault for allowing myself to be used by an alien shape changer. Everything is my fault."

"No, Captain," Spock whispered as Kirk's despair pierced his barriers.

"What can you know of Human love, Human feeling? Don't speak to me of accepting death when you don't understand the pain of losing someone you love."

The tone was scathing, the eyes blazed with a fury so intense that Spock retreated further, the words stabbing at him like sharp knives slicing through his defences. Vulcan shields were useless against this man; Spock had known it before, but had still not fully realised his vulnerability to Kirk's emotions.

"I only wish to help," he murmured in an attempt to soothe his Captain, seeing helplessly that he could not.

"Help? How can you help?" Kirk's voice was rough. "You cannot help me, no-one can. I am alone."

Spock braced himself, attempting to ignore the sharp waves of agony which enveloped him. "Jim," he said, "no, not alone. You are not - "

"Get out!" Kirk ordered, his tone harsh. "Get out of my sight."

"Captain..."

Kirk grabbed him roughly by the arms, and shook him hard. The full intensity of his emotions penetrated Spock's nervous system, causing the Vulcan body to shudder violently in reaction. His face full of anguish, Kirk pushed the unresisting Vulcan away, the force of his strength causing Spock to crash heavily against the door.

"Get out!" Kirk repeated. "I don't need you."

Turning away, he sank down onto the couch and lowered his face onto his hands.

Weaving as Kirk's pain reverberated through him, Spock touched the unlocking mechanisms of the door. He had to leave here, hide from those fearsome emotions, from the bitter angry words and rejection. The door slid open and he stepped forward, desperate now to reach his quarters. There he would be safe; there he would find peace. There - He stopped. There he would not find peace.

He drew himself up. *COWARD*, he chastised himself. He was running away from his responsibilities again instead of facing them. With a steady breath and Vulcan control, he forced himself to step away from the doorway. The door slid closed and he locked it again.

Leaning back against the wall for support, he studied the huddled figure of his Captain, concentrating all his jangled senses upon him. Faintly he heard the almost inaudible whisper coming from the distressed Human.

"I'm sorry, Spock. I'm sorry. What have I done to you?" Spock was about to speak, but Kirk continued. "I've given him even more pain. I swore I would keep it from him."

Suddenly it all fell into place. Unaware that he was not alone, Kirk had given it away; it was *not* that he was unwilling to discuss his problems and did not want Spock's help, but that he had been trying to protect his telepathic friend from such pain. He had been driving him away for that reason until these last minutes when his grief had overcome him, and he had lost his tight control.

Deep compassion for Kirk swept through the Vulcan and before he realised what he was doing, he moved towards his friend and knelt before him.

Kirk moaned silently in deep despair as he heard Spock leave the room. He pressed his face against his hands, helplessly murmuring apologies he knew would not be heard. Why had he lost his temper? How could he have subjected his friend to that? A part of him had seen the hurt he had caused, but he had been unable to

control the bitter words he had spouted; words he would have given anything to have left unsaid. Spock, with that eidetic memory of his, would never forget them, nor the anger which had thrown him against the door.

His eyes burned; his head ached; dizziness and nausea wreaked their misery upon him. Shame encompassed his soul. He leaned his elbows on his knees, bent his head down lower, and clasped the back of his neck tightly.

"What have I done?" he whispered. "How could I hurt him like that?"

"Jim," the voice said insistently. "Jim," it persisted. "Jim..." It was Spock's voice. "Jim..." He was dreaming. "Jim..." He was fantasising. "JIM!" He was imagining it. "JIM!!" the voice ordered in a command tone he had heard once before. He lifted his head and found himself looking into the concerned face of his Vulcan friend. He blinked. Was he dreaming? He gave himself a shake.

"Jim," Spock said. "Allow me to help you. I can help you."

"Spock," he murmured, his throat tight with emotion, his dizziness threatening to overwhelm him.

"Give me permission to touch your mind. I will attempt to heal these wounds within you."

"No," Kirk said, despite the warmth he remembered from the previous Healing, although desperate for that touch which soothed his pain in a way nothing else could do. "I can't give you any more of my pain. I saw what it did to you, and I will not allow you to endure that again."

Spock's gaze was steady as he replied to those words. "I was unprepared; afraid. Now I realise that my own fears are not important. I can master them. I will master them. It is my duty to help you. We are friends, and that means taking responsibility for one another. You must permit me to exercise my right concerning your welfare. You must yield to me in this."

Kirk frowned, unable to understand him, but seeing the determination in his expression and the conviction behind his words. Suddenly he found in himself the desire to give Spock permission for the meld.

"I will not allow you to torment yourself any more, Jim," Spock continued. "I have been remiss in my duty to you. Your very command is at stake here - do you not realise it?"

Kirk thought over those words and saw the truth in them. His command was in jeopardy. Too much had happened in such a short time, too much for any man to handle alone. He had once told Spock that he accepted their friendship on Vulcan terms; he had not known the ramifications of that, but had not been concerned about it. His relationship with his Vulcan friend was intense, yet relaxing, close, yet at times unfathomable in its complexity. All he knew was that he trusted Spock implicitly, and if his friend required his compliance in this matter, then he was obliged to concede to him. He almost laughed at himself. James T. Kirk complying - conceding - yielding to another!! Had that ever happened before? Had he ever allowed himself to be totally dependent on another person apart from

Spock? And even the time with Spock, had it been willingly? Or had it been that he had had no choice, injured as severely as he was?

He looked into the now well-known face of his companion, seeing the earnest and worried gaze. All his resistance deserted him in a sudden rush and he knew that he would yield to Spock in this - and be glad to do so - for he was so tired of bearing the burden alone, and stupid if he continued in the same manner. With a lift of the heart, he noted how Spock's facial muscles relaxed. Those Vulcan empathic abilities had sensed his mood.

"What must I do?" he asked, feeling his own tension begin to lift.

"It is different from the physical Healing," Spock informed him quietly. "It demands a deeper probe which can only be achieved if you co-operate with me." He hesitated on seeing alarm in Human eyes. "Jim, I have not attempted such a Healing before. It will be as new and difficult for me as it will be for you. I do not know how to guard myself against your emotions, for as you are aware, I am not trained in these disciplines. I believe my success last time was due to instinct, and the special attunement we share."

"I'll trust that," Kirk reassured. "I'll place myself in your hands - but I don't want to hurt you. I've seen what my anger has caused you."

"Do not worry," Spock said. "I am prepared. I will help you attain the correct level of relaxation, then you must willingly open your mind to me."

He glanced down for a moment before he continued, wondering how to explain the meld to one whose thoughts and memories had been violated by the Zmarran. How could he reassure him? There was only one way, a method he had used once before with this man.

Allowing his sympathy to flow through him, he reached out to grip his friend's shoulders. He saw it penetrate Jim's skin to settle into the tightly bunched muscles, and gradually he felt the Human body relax under his hands.

"You have experienced the mind-touch before, but this must go beyond that surface level into your memory and feelings surrounding Gary's death, and the happenings since. Those are the memories you must reconcile and overcome."

Kirk shuddered slightly, despite the contact of his friend, despite his trust in Spock. To be touched at such a level by another - could he bear that? He would be more than naked; he would be totally exposed, his petty weaknesses known to the highly civilised Vulcan. He would be subject to the will of another, just as he had been with the Zmarran.

"No, Jim," Spock said, clearly sensing his unease. "Do not fear the meld. You will be a willing partner in it. Remember also that I too have been afraid of being so close to another. I know how you feel."

Slowly Kirk smiled, his nervousness abating at that admission, sympathy taking its place. "I'm sorry, Spock. I've come into your life and wreaked havoc."

Spock's eyebrows climbed, his startlement obvious to the Human

who watched him so closely.

"Do not apologise, Jim," Spock said after a long moment. "You have done me great honour in bestowing your friendship upon me. I was alone until you became my friend - my life was empty and I did not know it. You have given me much. Allow me to repay you by using my Vulcan abilities. I swear that I will be most careful of your privacy. I will only touch the pertinent memories. I could not abuse your trust in me - I would die first."

"I know you would," Jim answered hoarsely. He tried to clear his throat, but the hard lump in it persisted. He clasped the arms which surrounded him. "Please proceed."

"Very well."

A flash of fear that he could not control swept down his spine. "Spock," he murmured. "Forgive me."

"Jim," Spock said softly, "be not afraid."

Kirk berated himself. Was he really still afraid of it? *Fool*, he mocked himself. How could he be afraid of being too close to Spock? Had they not already joined in the friendship bond? He sighed as he remembered the strange tingling sensation which had ignited at the touch of their fingertips and had spread through his hand and arm into the depths of his inner self.

Spock, catching his thoughts through the touch, increased the volume of assurance to him. He was totally committed to his Captain's peace of mind now, and he would allow no-one to prevent him from fulfilling his responsibility - not even Kirk himself.

"Jim," he said firmly, "you will yield to me now. Open your mind to me." He pressed Kirk's shoulders tightly.

Unable to speak, Kirk nodded his assent. He closed his eyes, sighed very deeply and with nervous anticipation opened himself to the telepathic contact. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide; he must face this and accept it with as much courage as possible.

I yield to you, he said silently as Spock's fingers touched his face establishing the meld. *My mind is open to you.*

I am here, Spock's familiar mind-voice said.

I am not afraid, he assured Spock, suddenly realising he spoke the truth.

Slowly, the true calmness of Vulcan relaxation overtook his senses and he gratefully sank into it, welcoming the peace it brought, allowing it to filter deeply into him. After a time, he felt the jolt of returning memory as the events at the barrier replayed themselves. He forced himself not to recoil from them.

Gary, struck by the energy bolt, his eyes turning silver. The frightening callousness which had grown along with the immense power; the fight to the death when he had buried his friend alive.

Time flipped backwards again, and Academy days returned. Once again he relived the attack on him - the result of Gary's frustrated sexual desire for him - then the apparent acceptance by Gary of his lack of interest in such a relationship, and the true and caring

friendship which had evolved between them.

\All those years it was still there,\ he said silently in the depths of the meld. \It remained there growing and twisting inside him until that day in my quarters when he voiced it again. I rejected him, Spock. That's the reason he allowed the power to corrupt him. My fault - it was all my fault. Would it have been so difficult for me to have given him what he wanted? I did love him. Why could I not let him love me as he wished? Why was it so repulsive to me?\

\It was not your fault, Jim,\ Spock said soothingly. \You cannot take responsibility for another's needs if those go against your nature. You must be true to yourself. I do not understand Human sexual behaviour, but I do know that to have succumbed to Gary's wishes would have destroyed your integrity and your belief in yourself. Accept what has happened. It was not your fault. It was Gary's own tormented needs and desires; he could not help himself - his own flaws were too deep to handle the power he acquired. Dr. Dehner showed what Human integrity could do with such a power. Think upon her; her nobility of character saved your life. She willingly died for you. You must respect that and put your guilt aside. Remember Gary as a friend whose company you enjoyed for many years. Remember him as he would wish you to.\

A sense of peace descended upon Kirk, peace over Gary's death, about the close friendship they had shared for so many years; and memories of all the good times together flooded in on him.

\Sara.\ The thought came unbidden. The fragile peace deserted him as shame over how he had been used by the shape-shifter overcame him, as the events replayed themselves with relentless detail. \I should have resisted it!\ he cried. \It used me, playing me so easily, predicting my every response.\ Revulsion for himself encompassed him.

\No, Jim,\ Spock argued. \It was using its natural ability, for it did not have the intelligence to understand there was another way. Do not be so harsh on yourself. Accept what has happened. No-one, and certainly not I, thinks any the less of you. It was not your fault. You fought against it, you were not weak - you would not take it to Zmarra. Allow me to ease the sharpness of your pain and grief, permit me to help you, my brother.\

\Yes,\ Kirk said, his mind voice pleading.

A warmth penetrated him as tendrils of the Healing Gift spread themselves along the passageways of his thought patterns to the raw emotions below; they brought relief from the pressurising torments he had suffered for so long and left a sense of euphoria in their wake. The tight bands of tension disappeared, leaving him weakened and shaky; he slid into a dark place surrounded by the touch of an alien mind, and was comforted. He huddled there, secure, as he gradually regained his strength, until he was able to reassert his own will and determination and find himself again.

\Spock,\ he called into the darkness. \How can I ever repay you?\

His friend's mind-voice was faint. \Let there be no talk of payment between us, Jim. I only fulfilled my obligation to you. Forgive my weakness, I must break the link now.\

\Spock?\ Kirk said worriedly, concentrating on the Vulcan presence in his mind. Yes, he could sense the lessening of that dependable strength, he could feel the exhaustion not his own. He felt a complete and utter helplessness; Spock had helped him resolve all that had been troubling him, eased his anguish and fears, but the Vulcan had paid a price.

The shock of aloneness hit him like an ice-cold shower; he blinked the water away from his eyes, then rubbed at his face, the wetness of tears covering his fingers. The uniform shirt stuck damply to his neck and he realised he must have wept a great deal during the meld, although he had been unaware of it. He sniffed, then taking a deep breath searched for control. He found it easily enough, for the deep pain within him was barely a faint echo now. The nightmare of Gary's death, the loss of Kelso and Dehner and the episode with the shape-shifter would always remain with him, but they would never haunt him again. He would be able to run his ship, his life, without the guilt and grief which had almost destroyed him.

Gratitude for his Vulcan friend swept through him. How could he ever thank him, a being who had taken on all his suffering, and had shown him the way to accept and overcome it.

"Spock," he said, looking down at the bent head of the Vulcan who now slumped at his feet. "Spock!" he exclaimed in alarm.

Spock heard his Captain's voice and forced himself to respond. He banished the trauma and exhaustion the Healing had caused. For a time that was possible. He straightened his shoulders and looked up at his friend, but once more he had underestimated the non-telepathic Human's intuition.

"You must rest," Kirk said in a voice full of concern. "You look very strained."

"I am perfectly all right," he tried to reassure, but he saw Kirk's expression harden.

"No, you are not. You will rest."

"But Jim - " he protested.

To his complete startlement he was pulled to his feet. Too bemused and weakened to resist, he allowed Kirk to push him onto the couch, lift his feet onto it, and settle him down against the cushions.

"Captain - " he managed at last through his embarrassment, aware there was a green flush on his cheeks which was not normal for him.

"You will yield to me now," Kirk said determinedly. "Don't argue with me - just lie there and rest."

Spock stared at him uncertainly, but Kirk's air of command was fully operational. He had been given no choice in the matter; the healing meld had worked and his Captain was his usual assertive self again. He sighed with relief. It had been the hardest thing Spock had ever done in his life, to reach the exact memories, to help Jim exorcise them, to mute the sharpness of his grief, to assuage his guilt. It would have been so easy to breach other memories, to sweep through the unprotected mind and read it fully. But, as he

had told Jim, he would have died first rather than abuse his trust. He closed his eyes, exhausted now but content. Jim had allowed him to help, and now would be able to face whatever the future might bring.

He sat up with a start, realising he must have drifted into sleep for a time. His eyes focused on his friend standing silently staring out of the port viewer. He watched him for a few moments, noting with interest how Jim slowly became aware of his gaze. Once again he wondered what kind of receptiveness they had to one another; Vulcan and Human, telepath and non-telepath...

With a smile, Kirk turned to face him. "You didn't sleep for long."

"How long, Captain?" he asked.

"About an hour."

"I did not intend to sleep at all, Captain. I am sorry."

Kirk came over to sit beside him. "You must take whatever steps are necessary for your full recovery from all of this. I can only guess the toll it has taken on you, but I require that you care for yourself now."

"But Captain," Spock began. "I am - "

Kirk grabbed his arms in a tight hold. "You said that friendship meant us taking responsibility for one another."

Spock nodded slightly; he *had* told Jim that. "Yes," he murmured uncertainly, wondering what his friend was leading up to. He tried to clear his head, but he was still weary from the Healing.

"Then," Kirk said with a satisfied grin, "you must permit me my right to exercise *my* right concerning your welfare. You must yield to me in this."

Realising he had been trapped by his own words, Spock sighed deeply in resignation. "I yield to your judgement in this, Jim," he said.

"Good," Jim said with obvious satisfaction. "Now you must do whatever it takes to recover from this ordeal. What must you do, Spock?"

"Meditate and rest," Spock replied immediately.

"Implement at once," Kirk ordered, afraid that Spock might neglect himself in his unselfish Vulcan way.

"And," Spock quickly added, "nourishment. The Healing uses much energy." He paused for a moment, then asked, "Would you dine with me, Jim?"

"I would be honoured," Kirk replied, delighted with the invitation, realising that Spock had probably never asked anyone that before.

Friendship meant responsibility, that much was certain, but Kirk knew that his responsibility to Spock went beyond any other. Human relationships were easy-going, often transient and temporary,

but to a Vulcan it meant deep personal commitment. Spock had given him his trust, and Kirk knew with complete certainty that he would die before breaking that trust. How had he come so close to Spock? Why had the reticent, self-sufficient logician allowed it? Kirk closed his eyes for a moment, making a silent vow to honour and respect his Vulcan friend always, and not intentionally cause him any hurt; to be careful to remember his non-Human sensibilities as he understood them; to learn about his customs and ideals.

He opened his eyes to Spock's stare upon him and he knew that those telepathic senses had caught his thoughts. He smiled, not minding, and saw a glimmer of startlement in dark Vulcan eyes.

What did he feel for this being who was closer to him now than even his own brother? He tried to cover his thoughts, for he knew that if Spock picked them up Vulcan reserve would be assaulted. The bond he had forged with Spock was something few were privileged to know, a fact even a Vulcan could not deny. His affection for Spock was very deep, and he wondered if Spock felt anything like that for him. He felt something, Kirk knew, for he sensed it in the meld, but Spock would never articulate his feelings, and that was a fact that Kirk would have to respect.

"I'm hungry," he said lightly, after dismissing such thoughts. He would ponder them another time in private.

"Indeed," Spock replied. "I too am somewhat hungry."

"Then we mustn't delay. Your health is of prime importance to me."

Spock swallowed hard. "Captain, I am not worthy of your concern, nor of such emotional feeling. I am a Vulcan and I cannot return such Human - " He stopped on seeing the startled expression on Kirk's face. "Forgive me," he added warily. "I did not intentionally read your thoughts, but their volume was completely audible to me due to the telepathic residue from the mind-meld. It will fade in time, so there is no - " He swallowed again and bowed his head.

Unable to meet his Captain's eyes, afraid of his anger - and worse, the fear and even rejection of this man - it suddenly came to him that to lose Kirk's friendship would be a blow he would not recover from. Kirk would have resented having his thoughts known without his permission; why had he not been able to shut them out? Why had he even admitted having heard them?

A hand on his shoulder disturbed his recriminations; Kirk's hand pressed into him firmly.

"Mr. Spock," Kirk said, "friendship with you is certainly not dull, but let there be no misunderstandings between us, please."

Spock looked into the relaxed and open face of his Human friend, and was given a smile which almost made him return it with one of his own. He caught himself in time.

"I do not mind if you picked up my thoughts," Jim assured. "They were genuine, meaningful thoughts - I am sorry they made you uncomfortable."

Kirk smiled again on seeing the deeper shade of green on his friend's angular face, but quickly brought his amusement under

control. "I promise I will try not to think such things again in your company."

"Thank you, Captain," Spock replied tonelessly, but Kirk saw the struggle for composure in the Vulcan eyes and he knew that Spock was aware that he had seen it.

Kirk led the way out of the privacy cubicle, relaxed now with an inner peace. He would be able to face their next mission; he had finally, with Spock's assistance, laid the ghosts to rest. He would be able to face the Zmarran without anger and revulsion, and would offer it Federation help to redress the situation of its enslaved people.

Human and Vulcan walked the corridors of their ship in silence. The gentle hum of the warp engines vibrated the deck slightly under their feet. The crew they passed stepped aside for them with profound respect and awe. All knew of the special leadership of their Starship; all were proud and confident in the unique partnership of the Captain and First Officer. All were aware that the Enterprise was the pride of Starfleet because of a friendship that spanned two completely different cultures, and was an example of interspecies co-operation which was a shining example to everyone.

Spock, receptive to the people around him, was aware of the thoughts of the mainly Human crew. He drew his shields more closely around him, but he allowed himself a moment of pleasure at the positive, warm Humanity surrounding him.

As they stood in the turbolift, Spock turned to face his friend. "You will be attending the concert, Captain?" he asked.

Kirk's eyes lit up. "Certainly. Will you?"

"Indeed. I will be performing."

Spock was unprepared for the emanations of sheer delight from his Captain. He tried unsuccessfully to protect himself.

"I am so pleased, Spock," Kirk said.

"I am honoured."

"Lt. Uhura liked your playing, then?"

"Indeed. She requested that I accompany her singing, as well as play solo."

Kirk gasped. He stopped the lift, faced the confused Vulcan and shook him exuberantly. "You're accompanying Lt. Uhura?!" he exclaimed.

"I believe I just informed you of that fact, Captain," Spock replied in complete confusion.

Why was Jim shaking him? Why was he so excited? Human behaviour was totally inexplicable.

"I can't wait to see this," Jim said. "I just can't wait!"

His quiet reserved Vulcan was coming out of his shell to do something he had never done before - not only to play his lyre in

public, but to combine his talent with Uhura's. Kirk knew that Spock was doing it for one reason only, and he was deeply touched.

"Thank you," he said, knowing that anything else was unnecessary.

Spock bowed slightly in acknowledgement.

Jim Kirk stood back, unlocked the lift mechanism, and leaned back against the wall. He wondered what his crew would make of such an event; he had a feeling both they and he were going to be very pleasantly surprised. He did not know Uhura well, but his instincts told him that she was a remarkable woman, and one not afraid to disturb a Vulcan. What was his austere, reticent friend in for at the concert?

He could not wait.

McCoy accompanied Kirk to the Enterprise Music and Drama Society concert. He was delighted to see his friend was back to his old, confident self. The Captain seemed extremely eager to see Mr. Spock play the lyre; in fact, once the crew had heard that the mysterious, emotionless Vulcan was an accomplished musician and would be taking part in the concert, the excitement could be felt in the atmosphere all over the ship.

The Doctor knew that the Vulcan had done something to heal his Captain. McCoy would have given anything to have been a witness to it, to study such a phenomenon, but he was painfully aware through Kirk's guarded words that it was a very private thing between himself and Spock and he could not explain it to McCoy in any but general terms. Although happy at Jim's recovery, McCoy could not help but be a little jealous of the Vulcan who had been able to do what he - a Doctor - could not. And he could not understand Jim's attachment to the austere, cold First Officer; he often would recall Spock's rejection when McCoy invited him to join him for a drink. That had hurt him in some unknown way and made him angry every time he thought of it.

He settled into a seat and looked around. The theatre was full, but the rest of the crew would be able to see it from the rec rooms if they wished. Those on duty would be able to view it on tape or hologram whenever they desired. McCoy suspected that the entire crew would want to watch this history-making event. A Vulcan playing for an audience! The event of the century! Mr. Spock deigning to share his talent with the poor Humans of the Enterprise!

Kirk grinned at him, and he returned the smile a little grumpily. "This had better be good," he said.

Uhura was a gorgeous woman, McCoy noted - not for the first time. She came onto the stage to introduce the first act. She wore a colourful gown of African design which set off her beautiful form to advantage. McCoy sighed and settled back to enjoy the show.

The enthusiastic audience gave all the performers loud applause, but the anticipation in the air was electric as the time for Mr. Spock's appearance neared; even McCoy felt a touch of excitement as Uhura introduced him.

He walked across the stage dressed completely in black. A gasp

of startlement spread through the crowd, for no-one had ever seen the First Officer wear anything other than his uniform. His outfit was of classic Vulcan design and showed the lithe, slim body to perfection.

Whispers reached McCoy's ears from the two women sitting behind him.

"He's stunning, Christine," Janice Rand's unmistakeable voice said. "He looks like some Vulcan warrior prince."

"Magnificent," Christine Chapel breathed.

McCoy grinned a little, shook his head, and prepared himself for a boring time. The sound of stringed instruments was not to his taste, and he did not imagine that a cold Vulcan musician would change his opinion.

Kirk watched his friend with pride, knowing that beneath that calm exterior there were nerves and fear, just as much as any Human would feel, perhaps even more - but Spock was overcoming Vulcan reserve and privacy to please him.

Slowly, Spock sat down upon a stool, tuned the lyre, then looked up at the audience. "I wish to play a Vulcan melody for you. It is called 'T'hy'la'."

The unfamiliar word seemed to linger in the air. Spock stared into the audience, picking out the figure of his friend easily despite the subdued lighting. Assured that Jim was there, he proceeded to play the ballad of the warrior-brothers Sendel and Sivan.

Kirk sat, chills running up and down his spine as the alien music entered his soul. He had felt Spock's eyes upon him and had known - somehow - that the title, although he did not understand its meaning, the melody and message of the music were all dedicated to him. The unusual Vulcan chords and phrases caused delightful shiverings in those with an ear for music, but Kirk felt it the deepest of all.

There was a stunned silence as the music stopped, then sudden riotous applause. Spock bowed his head until quiet reigned again, then played two more pieces - one Vulcan, the other an old Earth song which all recognised.

Jim watched, smiling - Spock had played him those songs once before. He applauded enthusiastically, then waited with barely concealed glee as Uhura returned to the stage, knowing what no-one else in the audience did, that these two were going to join forces. He was not disappointed at the startled response as Uhura announced that Mr. Spock would accompany her, the electric excitement as that registered with them.

"Well I'll be damned!" McCoy exclaimed.

Kirk laughed, but could not spare a moment to answer him.

Uhura's voice was lovely; she sang three old ballads and two recent compositions, flawlessly accompanied by the Vulcan lyre. Its alienness added spice to the songs, giving them an other-worldly sound which was spine-tingling. Kirk wondered how long they had rehearsed together and when they had found the time.

The final song was a humorous little tune about falling in love with a handsome man who did not even notice her. Uhura smiled for a brief second as Spock played the instrumental section of the melody, then moving closer to him and quite clearly taking her courage in both hands, she began to sing to him. Kirk spluttered and laughed. He had suspected that Uhura might not be able to resist the temptation, but how would Spock react?

Spock had enjoyed playing in the concert, he had even found satisfaction in accompanying Uhura's melodious voice, but when she turned to him, singing words of passion to him, he had almost faltered. Surely she should know better? She had always respected his differences in the past. Resolutely he continued to play, but as she came closer to him he was ready to freeze her with a look of extreme disapproval for taking such a liberty with him. But he heard Jim's delighted laughter, and something in the quality of that sound, the happiness in it, stopped him. Jim had suffered enough - how could Spock deny him a little amusement, even if it was at the expense of Vulcan dignity?

He stared at Uhura with a look of long-suffering, conveying a calmness and acceptance of her actions which she immediately saw and seized. She sang and danced around him with a sensuous abandon which brought the entire audience into fits of laughter as he continued to accompany her unconcernedly, to all outward appearances a perfect foil to her attempts to make him respond to her teasing. His sensitive hearing only heard the sound of Jim's happiness, and inwardly he smiled.

Once the audience finally allowed them to go the performers all clustered around Uhura and Spock, congratulating them.

Uhura turned to the Science Officer. She was still dazed that he had allowed her to tease him and had even gone along with it. He stood beside her now, all formality and reserve. Why had he done it? She was unsure, but she felt it had something to do with the Captain.

"Mr. Spock, you were wonderful - the hit of the show."

"You are too generous," he replied calmly. "Everyone who participated was excellent."

She smiled a little, tried to hold back her trembling and said, "May I ask you a favour, Mr. Spock?" She did not know how he would react to her request, but she was determined to ask it anyway.

"You may ask," he replied.

"Will you... would you... Would you do me the honour of teaching me to play your lyre?" There, she had said it, but she saw how it had startled him. He raised his eyebrows, blinked several times, then swallowed hard. *Stupid! What a stupid request to make of him!* He would be offended, and would certainly refuse her.

"I would be honoured, Lt. Uhura," he said, to her complete and utter delight.

Before she could find the words to thank him, Kirk came striding over to them. Uhura had never seen him so relaxed and happy. His eyes sparkled with pleasure and his body seemed to dance with exuberance and vitality. He had never looked more handsome, and Uhura sighed with the deepest regret she had ever known. Why

did such a man have to be her Captain, and therefore out of bounds to her?

"Uhura!" he exclaimed. "You were wonderful. Thank you for arranging such an enjoyable show." He put an arm around her shoulder and hugged her against him for a moment. "Well done," he said, releasing her.

She smiled with embarrassment and confusion at his praise, but accepted it with gratitude and pleasure. Like all aboard, she knew his good opinion of her mattered. "My artists were excellent, Captain. Very talented."

Kirk took them all in with a sweeping glance. "Yes, every single one of them." He smiled widely at them.

Blushes and murmured thanks were the response to his praise, and he looked at them all with real pride, but his gaze lingered on Spock and Uhura could see the affection in his expression. She smiled. It was her privilege to serve on a ship with two such command officers. She had never seen their like before, and suspected that she never would again. The true principles of the United Federation of Planets were embodied in these two.

Kirk drew Spock aside. "I want to talk with you."

Spock visibly tensed, but he obediently followed Kirk to one of the small backstage dressing-rooms and silently awaited his friend's words.

Kirk studied the decorations on the wall for some minutes before he faced his First Officer. He did not know what to say, how to thank this friend who had given him so much. "Thank you," he finally said. It was hopelessly inadequate, but he could not find the words.

Spock bowed slightly, but did not reply.

Taking a deep breath, Kirk asked what had been gnawing at him since Spock had played his first song. "What does 't'hy'la' mean?"

Spock's eyes stared at him with almost hypnotic intensity. "It is an ancient Vulcan word. It means friend - but more than friend - it also means brother. It is what you are to me, Jim... my t'hy'la - bond-brother, chosen brother."

Jim was silent. He could not speak, the depths of his emotion choking him as he realised that the song had truly been dedicated to him. He sighed with contentment. In this alien being he had found a friend like no other.

"You've honoured me greatly, Spock," he finally was able to say. He smiled. "My t'hy'la," he added, sounding out the word very carefully.

In reply he received the faintest hint of a smile, but it disappeared as quickly as it came and he wondered if he had imagined it.

"Are there words to the song?" he asked.

Spock gave a slight start. "Indeed."

"Will you tell me what it is about?"

"It is an ancient tale about two warriors, Sendel and Sivan."

"Yes?" Kirk encouraged.

Spock seemed very hesitant, and Kirk grew puzzled. Had he inadvertently asked the wrong thing? There were so many unknowns about Spock. His customs and traditions were still a mystery.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, Spock," he assured.

"It is a legend, Captain, and as such it is most fanciful."

"Legends interest me," Kirk said.

Spock squared his shoulders. "You must understand that it tells of a time when Vulcans were passionate, emotional beings. We had not yet learned the wisdom of Surak."

"I'll remember that," Jim said with a slight smile.

He settled down into a chair and listened as Spock told him the tale of a bond between two warriors which had withstood all the trials a malevolent goddess had thrown at it. Spock's voice was even and emotionless, but Jim could tell that it held special meaning to him. Sendel and Sivan had endured horrific torments for one another, ultimately dying in agony, each believing he could save the other by the sacrifice of his life.

Jim knew that Spock compared their bond of friendship to the one between the heroes of the legend and he was deeply touched. In the silence that followed the end of the story he thought on his special closeness with his Vulcan friend, and in a moment of insight realised the depth of the commitment Spock had made to him. He suddenly understood also that his own to Spock was just as deep. He had never thought of it in those terms before, but he knew he would give his life for Spock, and that Spock would do the same for him. He recalled what his friend had already done for him; feats of loyalty and devotion of which the ancient Vulcan heroes would have approved. He tried to control the deep emotion which threatened to overcome him.

"Forgive me," Spock said worriedly. "I have upset you."

Kirk sniffed, fought back the powerful feelings and stood up to face his friend. "No."

He reached out to reassure him, wanting suddenly to hug this alien-brother close to him, hoping that Spock would allow it, sensing somehow that he might - but a familiar Georgia drawl stopped him in his tracks.

"So there you are, Jim. Aren't you coming to the after-concert party?"

Jim turned as McCoy sauntered over to them. "Certainly we are," he replied.

"Captain, I have matters to - " Spock began.

"No," Kirk said firmly, a little agitated that the moment of

openness between them had been disturbed. "I insist that you attend."

Spock bowed his head and stared at the floor, and Jim could see his uncertainty then his mask of aloofness settling on him.

"Please," Kirk said, suddenly changing his approach.

Spock raised his eyes and looked at him with sudden resolution. "If it is your command - "

Jim smiled slightly. "No, Spock. Only my wish."

"Very well, sir," Spock replied.

"It'll be some dull party," McCoy commented.

"Bones!" Kirk chided softly.

"Mr. Spock is not a natural party-goer, Jim," McCoy remarked, staring at the First Officer with a touch of mockery in his expression. "Vulcans don't know how to have fun."

"I have never understood the term 'fun', Doctor. Frivolous activity is most illogical."

"Humans need to let their hair down sometimes, Mr. Spock. It's good for them."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Let their hair down?"

"Whoa! Enough!" Kirk said. "It's just an expression, Spock."

"Most illogical."

As Kirk walked to the turbolift with his two friends, he reflected on his good fortune on having two such as these with him. Aware there was a certain hostility between them, he was determined that somehow he would help them to understand one another. He suspected that it would be difficult. He was unsure whether Spock would allow any Human near him on anything like normal friendly terms, or if he even could. McCoy was a complex, sometimes eccentric personality, and Kirk did not know if he would be able to understand and make allowances for Spock's Vulcan differences.

He stopped and placed a hand on each man's shoulder. They both looked at him in surprise. He chuckled with slight embarrassment, but he was determined to tell them his feelings.

"I'm the luckiest Captain in Starfleet," he said, pressing their shoulders tightly. "With you two by my side, nothing will defeat me."

McCoy's face filled with pleasure and a certain uncharacteristic embarrassment. "Let's hope not, Jim," he replied.

Spock was silent, but Jim smiled at him and in return saw a warmth in the dark eyes.

No matter what trials lay ahead, he knew they would survive them. He felt so good now, ready to take on all the galaxy could throw at him. The events of the past weeks had finally been resolved and there would be no more nightmares to haunt him.

The future beckoned with promises of hope and adventure beyond his wildest dreams.

McCoy stretched out on his bed, but he could not sleep. His mind kept returning to the enjoyment he had felt listening to the sounds of the Vulcan lyre. What was it he had sensed about the quality of the music and the player? How could such an emotionless being bring forth such beautiful melodies? And why had the Vulcan allowed Uhura to tease him? Then there was the relationship with Jim, a friendship which was unique, working by its own very particular rules.

He sat up, ordered the computer to send a copy of the concert to his console and once again watched and listened to the Vulcan's performance. After it finished he sighed deeply. He had definitely not started in the best way with Spock. Every time they talked they had rubbed one another the wrong way. McCoy reluctantly admitted to himself that in the main it had been his fault, with his inability to keep his mouth shut.

He remembered Jim's parting words to him that evening. "I want you and Spock to get on better. I don't want disharmony on my ship."

Jim Kirk was the most intuitive Human McCoy had ever met. He always saw to the heart of any problem, and he could surmise the difficulties a clash of personalities between the Science Officer and Chief Medical Officer could cause the ship.

Some kind of mutual antagonism had formed between himself and the Vulcan, and McCoy knew it could get easily out of hand. He resolved he would try to gain an understanding with Mr. Spock - somehow. For it suddenly dawned on him that he respected the First Officer. Perhaps even liked him... a little?

He had seen what the friendship of the Vulcan had done for Jim. It mystified him - but for Jim's sake, he was pleased. There was a confidence, a relaxed assurance, a comfortable authority which had never been there before. Spock was the key - McCoy felt certain of that.

Aliens. Who could understand them? Vulcans? Impossible!

He was damn well going to try!!